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We are all in this together. A pilot study to promote well-being and social connectedness among international students in the University of Padua.

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Introduction

International literature has widely recognized international students as a vulnerable population, subjected to a number of challenges affecting their physical and mental health as well as their academic performance. The importance of exploring international students' experiences among different countries and implementing interventions aimed to promote their well-being has been highlighted. The number of international students enrolled in Italian universities has been increasing in the past few decades, however very few studies have been conducted in order to explore international students' experiences in this country.

The present thesis reports and discusses the provision of a psychosocial intervention, aimed to promote well-being and social connectedness among international students enrolled in the University of Padua. The psychosocial intervention consisted of a blended modality: participants took part in an in-presence group activity and received online self-help materials for 8 weeks. A total of 6 participants took part in the intervention, which focused on different topics such as well-being, social-media usage, communication skills, challenges and resources of being an international student and more. Qualitative data have been collected by audio-recording and transcribing verbatim each in-presence session. A thematic analysis has been conducted in order to identify recurrent themes related to the overall experience of being an international student enrolled at the University of Padua, personal well-being, experiences in dealing with local services and so on.

Results report that there are some aspects supporting and affecting international students' well-being, also needs, resources and challenges have been identified. Reported challenges faced by International students enrolled in the University of Padua are similar to those faced by foreign students in other countries (e.g. loneliness, linguistic barriers, etc.). However, the Italian context seems also to subject international students to unique challenges, suggesting the importance of assessing international students' experience in Italian universities to address their needs effectively.

The present thesis comprises 4 chapters structured as follows: Chapter 1 reports the state of the art concerning topics related to international students' experiences, well-being and interventions aimed to promote well-being and social connectedness. Chapter 2 reports the study objective and methodology. Results are presented in Chapter 3 and discussed in Chapter 4.

Chapter 1: State of the art

1. Being an international students

According to the definition provided by UIS (UNESCO Institute of Statistics) internationally mobile students are individuals who have physically crossed an international border between two countries with the objective to participate in educational activities in the country of destination, where the country of destination of a given student is different from their country of origin. OECD (2023) defined international students as those who received their prior education in another country and are not residents of their current country of study.

In the last two decades the number of international students enrolled in foreign universities worldwide has increased by an average of 4.8% per year, in 2018 the total number of international students was 5.8 million (OECD, 2020), reaching over 6.3 million international students in 2020 (UIS, 2022).

As international student mobility increased, broadening the market of higher education, Universities worldwide showed interest in recruiting international students, as they represent a fundamental source of revenue both for universities and hosting countries (Lopez et al. 2016).

The exponential growth of this phenomenon is associated with a growing interest in the population of international students, steaming from the responsibility of hosting Universities to enhance young people's learning experience and to meet international students' needs (Akanwa, 2015), making research in this field relevant worldwide.

1.1 International students: challenges and benefits of studying abroad.

The purpose of this paragraph is to provide an overview of international students' experiences, highlighting both positive aspects and challenges related to study abroad programmes. The results and studies presented do not have the ambition to capture all the nuances related to the experience of international students and must be read considering that the experiences of students attending university abroad are influenced by numerous personal and contextual factors (Khanal & Gaulee,

2019; Lee & Rice, 2007 cited in Sherry et al., 2010) and personal outcomes of study abroad programmes are heterogeneous, even between students belonging to the same country of origin (Heng, 2019). Despite the heterogeneity of this phenomenon, evidence provided by several studies allow us to identify some recurrent experiences among the international students' population which will be summarized in the following lines.

Choosing to study abroad is associated with both challenges and benefits, making international students' population a peculiar group if compared to other college students. International literature exploring the experience of studying in a foreign country, provides strong evidence regarding existing differences between international and local students enrolled in universities worldwide (Karyotaki et al., 2020; Poyrazli et al. 2004). Differing from local students, international students result in being exposed both to common challenges, regarding their role as university students, and peculiar challenges, associated with studying in a foreign country. Despite that, studying abroad has many long-lasting beneficial effects for international students (Cisneros-Donahue et al., 2012; Dwyer, 2004; Milian et al., 2015; Netz, 2021; Sisvath, 2021; Waibel et al., 2018) which contribute pushing many young adults towards the choice of studying abroad.

1.1.1 Challenges of studying abroad

Although the challenges faced by international students vary according to many factors, depending on the country of origin and the chosen destination (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019), some difficulties are widespread among the international students' population, regarding both academic and non-academic aspects (Ecochard & Fotheringham, 2017; Elturki et al., 2019). On one hand, academic challenges are related to difficulties in participating in classroom discussions, collaborating with domestic peers and understanding degree requirements (Caplan & Stevens, 2017; Lin & Scherz, 2014; Perry et al., 2016 cited in Elturki et al., 2019). On the other hand, non-academic challenges have to do with cultural differences, cultural shock, perceived

discrimination and racism, financial difficulties, housing, adaptation to new cultural norms, dietary cultural practices, etc. (Milian et al., 2015; Worae & Edgerton, 2023). Among the most cited challenges in the literature are cultural differences, language barriers and loneliness (Berry, 1997; Kim & Abreu, 2001 cited in Zhou & Zhang, 2014), affecting international students' integration into the new environment and their possibility to pursue their academic goals.

Those will be more specifically discussed in the following sub-paragraphs:

- *Cultural differences*: International students' cultural adaptation, defined as a "dynamic process by which individuals, upon relocating to new, unfamiliar, or changed cultural environments, establish (or re-establish) and maintain relatively stable, reciprocal, and functional relationships with those environments" (Kim, 2001 cited in Gong et al., 2021, p. 418), has been addressed by many researches. To reach cultural adaptation, which results to be fundamental for international students' well-being and their satisfaction with the academic experience, international students are meant to accommodate both at a psychological and sociocultural level with the new culture (Berry, 2005). According to Ioraga et al. (2020) "the experience of acculturation is a series of major life events that can be challenging for an individual and can trigger a stress reaction called acculturative stress" (p. 1) and international students seem to be particularly exposed to this phenomenon, which can lead to negative health outcomes such as depression, bulimic symptoms and body image disturbance.

- *Loneliness*: International students, compared to local students, result in being more exposed to experiences of loneliness (Bilecen et al., 2023), a well-known risk factor for health and well-being (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010), associated with mortality, depression and suicidal behavior (Diehl et al., 2018). As loneliness represents one of the main psychological risk factors associated with the experience of studying abroad, it will be discussed in more detail in *paragraph 1.2*.

- *Linguistic barriers*: Another challenge international students have to deal with is linguistic barriers, which can affect their academic results as well as their possibility to engage in social

relationships (Ecochard & Fotheringham, 2017) and to seek professional help (e.g. healthcare; Cao et al. 2022). Many studies focusing on international students' adaptation in the new country, highlighted the role of language proficiency as an essential lubricant easing the process of cultural and social adaptation (Senyshyn et al., 2008; Schutz & Richards, 2003 cited in Wright & Schartner, 2013). Studies conducted in English-speaking countries suggest that lower levels of English proficiency result in difficulties leading to depression or anxiety (Martirosyan et al., 2019 in Worae & Edgerton, 2023) among international students. Dovchin (2020) studied the psychological impact of linguistic racism on international students in Australia. He defined linguistic racism as “the violation of one’s fundamental human rights based on how one speaks certain languages and how one’s entitlements are denied and discriminated against in both institutional and non-institutional settings due to how one speaks English and other additional languages” (Dovchin, 2020, p.805). According to the author, international students who are subjected to linguistic racism, are “deprived of living a meaningful full social life” (p.808) and also at risk of developing a sense of “inferiority complex” (p.808) which may lead to self-marginalization, self-vindication, loss of social belonging and social withdrawal. The study shows that the majority of students involved in the research have been exposed to linguistic racism with negative effects on their mental health and wellbeing (e.g. lower self-esteem, social anxiety of speaking English, etc.; Dovchin, 2020), impacting on their academic and social achievements.

1.1.2 Benefits of studying abroad

Although available literature provides many data related to international students' difficulties, international students are generally satisfied with their academic experience (Milian et al., 2015; Dwyer, 2004) and there is evidence (Cisneros-Donahue et al., 2012; Cubillos & Ilvento, 2013; Haas, 2018; Milian et al., 2015; Sisavath, 2021; Sobkowiak, 2019) about personal benefits of studying abroad, which encourage many young adults to enroll in universities in foreign countries. The experience of studying abroad has a strong impact on international students' life, with effects

sustained over a period of 50 years (Dwyer, 2004) and it positively affects many different areas of one's life. First of all, moving to another country, meeting new people and cultures lead international students to broaden their horizon, experience personal growth and gain intercultural knowledge (Haas, 2018; Sobkowiak, 2019), increase their intercultural sensitivity and competences (Anderson et al., 2006; Clarke et al., 2009; Williams, 2005; Wolff & Borzakovskiy, 2018 cited in Netz, 2021), preparing international students to live and work in multicultural settings (Haas, 2019). Meeting foreign cultures, international students are often motivated to overcome stereotypes and prejudices, self-analyze their own cultural identity and modify attitudes and values which negatively affect cross-cultural interactions (Sobkowiak, 2019). According to Sutton and Rubin (2004) international students develop abilities which allow them to navigate basic living skills (Cisneros-Donahue et al., 2012) and they perceive themselves as more introspective and able to modify their behavior and reactions in culturally diverse settings after their experience of study abroad. Studying abroad results in gaining patience and flexibility, increasing the understanding of language, cultural differences and interdependence of countries (Cisneros-Donahue et al., 2012). Another study (Cubillos & Ilvento, 2013) explored the impact of studying abroad on self-efficacy beliefs among foreign language learners. Self-efficacy represents a predictor of academic and linguistic achievement and study abroad seems to enhance self-efficacy beliefs among international students, with positive learning outcomes.

Study abroad has been recognized as a valuable experience in one's life. Despite that, it is necessary to take into account that not many studies have been conducted yet. Cisneros-Donahue et al. (2012), highlighted that often, benefits of a study abroad program have been studied and discussed in an anecdotal way. In many studies these experiences have been described as "life-changing" and "transformative" (Cisneros-Donahue et al., 2012, p. 170) without assessing their direct impact on academic and cognitive growth. In their study, Cisneros-Donahue et al. (2012), demonstrate that international students show higher levels of knowledge if compared to those who did not study abroad. Authors explored knowledge gained by foreign students in five different areas, finding that

international students seem to gain more functional knowledge (“the skills and knowledge based needed to effectively function and navigate daily routines in a new environment”, p. 171); knowledge of world geography; knowledge of global interdependence (“knowledge of the impact that actions in one part of the world have on another part”, p. 171); knowledge of interpersonal accommodation (“understanding of the need for flexibility and patience in communicating with other cultures”, p. 171) and knowledge of cultural sensitivity (“ understanding of how language and cultural contexts impact the ability to relate to and communicate with individuals of other cultures”, p.171). Another potential benefit has to do with future employment opportunities. As mentioned in Restaino et al. (2020) people who studied abroad seem to work in higher-status employment sectors, they are more likely to have international jobs, and less likely to remain unemployed after graduation Amendola & Restaino, 2017; Ballatore & Ferede, 2013; González et al., 2001; King & Ruiz-Gelices, 2003; Natek & Lesjak, 2013; Norris & Gillespie, 2009; Parey & Waldinger, 2011; Teichler, 2004 cited in Restaino et al., 2020).

As mentioned at the beginning of this paragraph, understanding the international students’ experiences during their journey abroad is not easy. The dynamics characterizing this experience are complex and this is why research in this area is becoming increasingly important, especially in countries where the flow of international students has been increasing in recent years.

1.2 Loneliness and social isolation: common experiences among international students

Loneliness is defined as “the unpleasant experience that occurs when a person’s network of social relationships is deficient in some important way, either qualitatively or quantitatively” (Perlman & Peplau, 1981, p. 31).

Transition from high school to university is one of the major transitions in one’s life, which can entail the risk of feeling lonely (Diehl, 2018). International students result in being more exposed to experiences of loneliness compared to local students (Bilecen et al., 2023; Leung, 2001; Neto & Wilks, 2017; Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2002), a well-known risk factor for health and well-being (Hawkey and Cacioppo, 2010), associated with mortality, depression and suicidal behavior (Diehl,

2018; Girmay & Singh, 2019). According to literature, loneliness represents one of the major challenges international students have to deal with and it is strongly connected with other difficulties such as financial status, perceived discrimination (Neto, 2021), linguistic and cultural barriers, which make it harder for foreign students to establish social relationships in the new country. In many studies, international students reported having minimal or no contact with local people (Berry, 1997; Brown 2009; Parton, 2015 cited in Morris et al. 2021), struggling with loneliness since arriving in the new country (Sawir et al., 2008), especially in the first few months (Morris et al. 2021) and they recognized that “loneliness and isolation had affected their mental health” while studying abroad (Orygen, 2020 cited in Morris et al. 2021, p. 69). Loneliness affects well-being through several pathways which also involve academic performance. To cope with loneliness, international students tend to isolate themselves first, eventually talking to close family members and friends from home and looking for social interactions in the host country once they feel better (Wawera & McCamley, 2020). It has been well-documented that loneliness leads to an increase in isolation, making lonely people more segregated into their own “constricted” space (Banerjee & Rai, 2020). Leading to self-isolation (Wawera & McCamley, 2020), decreased sense of belonging and participation in a community (Bek, 2017) and promoting behaviors such as excessive eating, shopping, mindlessly watching television and spend time indolently (Genctan, 1999 cited in Bek, 2017) loneliness affects international students’ academic performance by reducing their participation in the academic environment. According to Bek (2017) “class participation is beneficial for academic performance and psychosocial well-being” (p.47) and “international students are expected to be actively involved in school and to be successful in achieving their goals” (p.48). The importance of having a network of resources has been explored by many studies. Being able to form friendship networks in the country of study result in higher rates of students’ satisfaction with life abroad (Sam, 2001 cited in Hendrickson et al., 2010) and represent one of the most important factors of acculturation, satisfaction, contentment, social support and success for this population (Bochner et al., 1985; Kudo & Simkin, 2003; Ying, 2002 cited in Hendrickson et al.,

2010). In addition to the struggle of forming friendship networks abroad, international students have to deal with separation from home, friends and family, which can result in feelings of loneliness. According to a study conducted in the U.S. Universities, international students seem to experience higher levels of homesickness if compared to local students and homesickness results to be associated with higher levels of anxiety, loneliness and social isolation (Poyrazil & Lopez, 2007). According to Weiss (1973) who distinguished emotional and social loneliness, international students can experience emotional loneliness (resulting from “the loss or the lack of a truly intimate tie such as that with a spouse, lover, parent or child [...]”; Weiss, 1973 cited in Sawir, 2008, p. 152) as they separate from family and friends while social loneliness (“loss of contact with those who share one’s concerns or view of the world”; Weiss, 1973 cited in Sawir, 2008, p. 157) stem from the difficulty in forming relationships in the new country. Exploring the importance of social connections and social networks among international students enrolled in Australian universities, Sawir et al. (2008) have recognized international students to be exposed to another type of loneliness they defined as cultural loneliness, which “is triggered by the absence of the preferred cultural and/or linguistic environment” (p.171). Introducing the construct of cultural loneliness, Sawir et al. (2008) provide an explanation of why even if some students have adequate access to social networks they still experience loneliness. In their study it has been recognized that cultural loneliness mostly affects international students from collectivist culture (e.g. Asia) facing Western norms and values that emphasize individualism, competitiveness and impersonal social relations (Sawir et al, 2008), making them feel more exposed and vulnerable. Asian international students report difficulties in making friends in a Western culture, international Chinese students in New Zealand were unhappy with their opportunities in making friends, and 71% of them reported the desire to have more local friends (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Cultural loneliness can reinforce personal and social loneliness, worsening international students’ well-being and health. As reported in Sawir, 2008, emotional loneliness seems to decrease by the installment of satisfactory “attachment relationships” while DiTommaso and Spinner (1997) have recognized the integration

into social networks as the best predictor of lower levels of social loneliness. On the other hand, cultural loneliness has to do with the extent to which a person manages to engage in relationships with locals, rather than adjust to the new culture setting aside core elements of their identity. Studies which explore how international students overcome loneliness found that seeking social support is one of the main keys to managing challenges faced abroad. Role of social support is further analyzed in the next paragraph.

1.3 Social support

Cobb (1976) has conceptualized social support as the perceived comfort, caring, esteem, or help an individual has from other people or groups (Cobb, 1976 cited in Alharbi & Smith, 2018). According to Rodriguez & Cohen (1998) social support is a multidimensional construct that refers to the psychological and material resources available to individuals through their interpersonal relationships, providing resources to satisfy needs for concern, approval, belonging and security (Cohen, 2004; Kaplan et al., 1977 cited in Bender et al., 2019). Although social support has been assessed in many ways, authors seem to agree in concluding that social support phenomena involve both objective and subjective elements (Turner & Brown, 2010). Cohen's (1988) distinction between *structural support* and *functional support* has been adopted in many researches exploring social support, its predictors and outcomes. *Structural support* refers to the quantitative aspects of one's social network in terms of the existence and quantity of relationships (Hefner & Eisenberg, 2009). Structural support is assessed by evaluating the organization of individuals' ties to one another, the frequency of contact with social network members and the structural characteristics of social ties (Pearlin, 1989; Umberson et al., 1996 cited in Turner & Brown, 2010), in order to measure social networks' integration and strength. *Functional support* refers to the perceived quality of relationships (Hefner & Eisenberg, 2009). Other distinctions and terms have been considered, contributing to a complex understanding of the construct of social support and its role in one's life. Many researches have considered *perceived support* or *emotional support*, defined as "the subjective belief or appraisal that one belongs to a communicative and caring social network"

(Cobb, 1976; Lakey & Scoboria, 2005 cited in Turner & Brown, 2010). Also *subjective social support* is commonly measured as either perceived social support or a sense of social integration and connectedness (Lee & Robbins, 1995; Zimet et al., 1988 cited in Bender et al. 2019). Despite conceptual difficulties, researches explored social support's impact on well-being and quality of life, finding an overall positive association between social support and health among different populations samples (e.g. children and adolescents; Chu et al., 2010; patients; DiMatteo, 2004; etc. cited in Bender et al. 2019). In particular, the connection between social support and depression seems to be highly robust (Turner & Brown, 2010). Henderson (1992) explored 35 studies that assessed the relationship between social support and depression. Even using different methods to measure both social support and depression, all the studies reported an inverse association between social support and depression. The main limitation in understanding how social support is linked to health and well-being consist in the lack of a fully explicative model of its impact on one's life. Though, as considered in many researches, two models have been proposed to describe the effects of social support on health (Bender et al., 2019; Cipolletta et al., 2022; Smith & Khawaja, 2011), mainly assessing its subjective component (i.e. perceived support; Turner & Brown, 2010). First, social support has been considered as having a main effect on mental health and well-being, whether or not significant stress is present. From this perspective, social support seems to directly enhance well-being by promoting positive psychological states, higher self-esteem and environmental control (Cohen & Syme, 1985). In contrast to the *main effect hypothesis*, Cassel (1976) and Cobb (1976) put forward the *buffer effect hypothesis*, arguing that social support may act to buffer or moderate the effects of life stress (Turner & Brown, 2010). According to the buffer hypothesis, in absence of relevant stressors in one's life a main effect of social support is not expected. This debate can be overcome considering that "all of us. . . even in the most benign and sheltered environments, are fairly continuously exposed to what we define as stressors" (Antonovsky, 1979 cited in Turner & Brown, 2010, p. 207), as well as observing it from both perspectives simultaneously. In fact, social support seems to have a generally positive effect on

well-being and that this effect increases as stress increases.

There is general agreement that international students experience less social support compared to local students and social support seems to become more valuable during adversity (Bender et al., 2019). As studying abroad represents a stressful life event, it is reasonable to think that the lack of social support can have a strong negative impact on international students' life as well as a supportive network of social resources can foster international students' health and well-being.

Being enrolled in a foreign university exposes international students to several challenges and acculturation pressures (Smith & Khawaja, 2011), pushing international students to negotiate their cultural belonging in order to reach psychological and sociocultural adjustment to the host society (Berry, 2005; Searle & Ward, 1990 cited in Bender et al., 2019). Psychological adjustment has been defined as "feelings of well-being and life satisfaction in the host culture" and, as reported in Bender et al.'s (2019) meta-analysis, it represents a central outcome of acculturation. Berry (2005) defined acculturation as "the dual process of sociocultural and psychological change in relation to host and heritage culture as the result of contact with people from different cultural backgrounds" (p. 698). Success in acculturation is linked to psychological well-being and sociocultural competence (Arends-Toth & Van de Vijver, 2006 cited in Bender et al. 2019), higher self-esteem and life satisfaction. While failing in the acculturation process can lead to acculturative stress, which can result both in physical (e.g. sleep and appetite disturbance, headaches, increases blood pressure, etc.; Mori, 2000) and psychological symptoms (e.g. isolation, helplessness, sadness, anger, clinical depression etc., Mori, 2000). In general, having a social support system leads to better cross-cultural transition (Mesidor & Sly, 2016) and there is a good reason to believe that social support promotes psychological adjustment among international students by buffering negative effects of stressors they are exposed to. Smith and Khawaja (2011) reviewed available literature related to the acculturation experiences of international students, finding that feeling socially connected and being content with one's social support networks result in lower levels of

acculturative stress among international students' population. Social support seems to moderate the relationship between acculturative stress and mental health symptoms as for the same level of stress, students with higher levels of social support exhibit less symptoms compared to those with lower support (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). According to Martirosyan et al. (2015) foreign students' adjustment is strongly linked to one's ability to establish social connections through several activities (e.g. peer groups, clubs, etc.; Martirosyan et al. 2015 cited in Bender et al., 2019) and social support represents the most essential contributor to international students' psychological well-being (Martirosyan et al. 2015 cited in Worae & Edgerton, 2023).

Bender et al. (2019), conducted a meta-analysis exploring social support's benefits on psychological adjustment synthesized 257 effects from 76 empirical studies. Their research is particularly interesting as it considers the effect of different types (e.g. subjective social support, objective social support and mixed social support) and source of support (e.g. conational, host national friends, other international friends and international host organizations, mixed sources and unspecified sources) on international students' positive and negative psychological adjustment. They found an overall positive association between social support and foreign students' psychological adjustment with type and source of social support emerging as moderators. In particular, subjective social support seems to be more strongly associated with psychological adjustment than objective and mixed social support. This finding can be interpreted in the light of Reinhardt et al.'s (2006) hypothesis. According to Reinhardt et al. (2006) objective social support received may trigger feelings of dependency, resulting in not benefit well-being as subjectively perceived support, which involves more emotional than practical aspects. In addition, practical support provided by other international students seems to be linked to negative effects, while emotional support positively affects the feeling of belonging (Celik et al., 2023). As regards sources of social support, receiving support from multiple sources leads to better adjustment than receiving it from a single source. When social support is provided by both host and conational it helps international students to adjust to the new environment at the same time maintaining a cultural identity resulting in higher levels of

happiness compared to social support received from conationals only (Bender et al. 2019). According to Norton (2022) receiving support from other international students only may lead to the marginalization of international students, creating “bubbles of international with the paradox effect of fostering exclusion and self-aggregation” (Celik et al., 2023). Many researches pointed out the importance of receiving social support both from hosts and conationals (Al-Sharideh & Goe, 1998; Kashima & Loh, 2006; Li & Gasser, 2005; Ying & Han, 2006; Ying & Liese, 1994; Zhang & Goodson, 2011 cited in Smith & Khawaja, 2011) demonstrating that it leads to best acculturation trajectories (Han et al., 2016). Having successful intercultural interpersonal interaction may enhance international students’ sense of belonging, with positive psychological and academic outcomes (Korobova & Starobin, 2015; Lowinger et al., 2016 cited in Brusting et al., 2019). Literature provides evidence that international students rely more on family and friends (Nabavi & Bijandi, 2018) and engage in relationships with conationals or other international students rather than locals (Poyrazli et al., 2004). However, a recent study highlighted that international students seem to rely more often on a partner or a friend rather than family members when seeking help and support (Cipolletta et al. 2022). Worae & Edgerton (2023) explored personal strategies employed by international students enrolled in a Canadian university. Staying in touch with family and friends back home (94.4%) and staying in touch with local friends (91.7%) are two of the most popular strategies reported by their sample.

Despite the limitations associated with the concept of social support and its evaluation, there is general agreement on its relevance in promoting international students’ well-being. And the importance of being able to rely on a social network composed of multiple resources of both locals and conationals is underlined by many studies. In light of this, promoting social connectedness among international students, locals and peers should be one of the goals of universities and organizations involved in the international students’ mobility, in order to enhance international students’ wellbeing, help them pursue their academic goals and satisfaction with their academic experience abroad. A recent study conducted in Italy (Celik et al., 2023) has confirmed the

importance of locals in fostering international students' sense of belonging as well as the central role of universities in creating boundaries between international students and the new pedagogical environment. Domestic-international students friendship programs (International Student Services – Columbus State University, 2021 in Mbous et al., 2022) could be implemented by universities as a potential of helping international students adjust into the new environment (Glass & Westmont, 2014 cited in Mbous et al., 2022).

2. The important role of well-being

As in the previous paragraph well-being has been mentioned many times, it seems necessary to deepen the knowledge of this construct.

In the current paragraph the concept of well-being and its definition will be explored, referring to the college students' population and attempting to identify factors that can influence their well-being.

2.1 Health and Well-being

In order to understand the role played by well-being in one's life it is crucial to consider it in relation with health.

Based on the biomedical model, the definition of health concerned physical wholeness for many years, including mental health only prior to 1900, however considering health as freedom from disease (Saylor, 2004). As reported in Saylor (2004), in 1948 the World Health Organization introduced the concept of health as well-being, defining health as “a state of complete physical, social and mental well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (WHO, 1948). Despite several limitations associated with such a definition, especially concerning the idea of health as a state of *complete* well-being (Huber et al., 2011), considering health as a multidimensional well-being is relevant as it allows people to achieve health even in the presence of disease or disability (Saylor, 2004). Also, considering health as a multidimensional well-being, led

to take into account the importance of health promotion, defined by the American Journal of Health Promotion, as “the science and art of helping people change their lifestyle to move toward a state of optimal health”, and not only disease prevention (Saylor, 2004). According to the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion (WHO, 1986), health represents a resource for everyday life that people can achieve when they are able to identify and realize their aspirations, satisfy their needs and change or cope with the environment, reaching a state of physical, mental and social well-being. Considering that several social variables (e.g. such as peace, shelter, education, food, income, a stable ecosystem, sustainable resources, social justice and equity) represent fundamental conditions and resources for health has several practical implications on health promotion, which requires to go beyond the health care sector, acting in a coordinated manner at different levels (e.g. governments, voluntary organizations, local authorities, families etc.), taking into account differences in social, cultural and economic systems (WHO, 1986). In fact, building healthy public policies, creating supportive environments, strengthening community action, reorienting health service as well as developing personal skills, have all been recognized as central aspects in promoting individuals’ health.

Across the years, many definitions of health have been provided (Saylor, 2004), attempting to account for the complexity of such a construct. Marks (2013), for example, highlighted that, despite the absence of a shared definition of health, there is one recurrent principle that has remained valid through centuries and shared among different cultures, namely the idea that health requires a balance between different aspects of life. According to Marks (2013) when defining health, psychosocial factors should be considered as they represent key elements of health. Psychosocial factors accounts for both psychological and social factors capable of influencing the “wellness-illness continuum” (Marks, 2013, p. 4), supporting a conceptualization of health as a multidimensional state and conferring the idea that one’s state of health is influenced by one’s behavior within social interactions. Recognizing that besides psychological processes (e.g. cognition, imagination, etc.) and biological factors, also culture and socioeconomic status as well

as spirituality, which can foster one's resilience in facing illness, are mediators of health, Marks (2013) proposed a new definition of health consisting in "a state of well-being with physical, mental, psychosocial, educational, economic, cultural, and spiritual aspects, not simply the absence of illness" (p. 4) and introducing the principle of compensation, which enables any element to compensate for the lack in other elements, allowing individuals to experience a positive state of well-being and health also when one or more elements are diminished, giving importance to balance and compensation as well as strength of elements influencing one's well-being and health.

Other authors (e.g. Atkinson, 2013; Kugelmann, 2017) have adopted a phenomenological approach in defining health and well-being, going beyond its components, considering health and well-being as relational and situated experiences. Adopting such perspective leads to bridge the division between subjective and objective, individual and collective health and well-being, considering health, well-being and illness as "ways of being-in-the-world" (Kugelmann, 2017, p. 55) and effects produced in specific times and places, rather than a set of individual qualities (Atkinson, 2013).

Another useful theoretical framework, which have also been adopted to understand the illness experience (e.g. Cipolletta, 2020; Cipolletta et al., 2017) and the lived experience of COVID-19 (e.g. Cipolletta & Gris, 2021; Cipolletta & Ortu, 2021; Tomaino et al., 2021), is the personal construct theory (PCT) introduced by George Kelly (1955). PCT is a comprehensive theory of personality, which can be applied to understand human development, learning and social processes, allowing for coherent psychological understanding of a person experiencing different activities of life (Chiari, 2016) and challenges (Tomaino et al., 2021). According to Kelly (1955) "a person's processes are psychologically channelised by the way in which he anticipates events" (p. 32) and such anticipation depends on one's system of constructs. As PCT has been developed out of *constructive alternativism*, a philosophical position underlining that "there are many successful ways in which a man may construe his world" (Kelly, 1992) not necessarily being a victim of circumstances, people construct their world of meanings based on the awareness of replications in

personal experience, testing their constructions, which can be accepted, revised or invalidated. According to PCT, change occurs when there is incompatibility between one's usual way of construing events and the experience (Kelly, 1955). To understand and describe experiences of change and its effects, PCT adopts diagnostic constructs named "transitions", referring to meanings that people give to changes in their own constructions system as well as accounting for different strategies people can use to cope with such transitions. According to Kelly (1955), people can experience the transition of *anxiety* when an event can not be construed within their personal construct system and such event is usually experienced as unknown; the *threat* can be experienced when an imminent comprehensive change to core constructs (i.e. those central to one's identity, Tomaino et al., 2021) is expected and the transition of *guilt* consists in a dislodgement from one's core role. According to PCT, people can cope with such transitions in different ways, represented by transitions of *hostility* and *aggression* (Kelly, 1955). *Hostility* consists in the attempt to extort evidence in favor of a prediction that has already been recognized as a failure while *aggression* consists in actively elaborating the situation, broadening one's perceptual field (Kelly, 1955). Another possible strategy is represented by a professional construct called *constriction*, which leads to minimizing apparent incompatibility between the experience and one's construct system, reducing one's perceptual field and excluding elements of conflict, as well as *dilation*, defined as the broadening of one's perceptual field in order to reorganize it on a more comprehensive level, not necessarily including in itself the comprehensive reconstruction of those elements (Kelly, 1955). According to this perspective, changes experienced by people stem from the perceived incompatibility between events and their usual ways of construing them rather than being due to external events (Kelly, 1955). Kelly has indeed referred to change as "movement", accounting for the dynamicity of the process of construing one's construct system, anticipating events, testing anticipations and giving them new meanings. Within the personal construct theoretical framework, Badzinski & Anderson (2011) explored the relationship between psychological well-being and measures of conflict and inconsistencies such as implicative dilemmas, defined as "cognitive

conflicts in which implicit associations between desired and undesired states prevent persons from actualizing their ideal selves” (p.1), finding a relationship between implicative dilemmas and measure of psychological distress (e.g. anxiety, guilt, self-esteem). When facing invalidation of one’s construct system, which can occur due to social relationships, events, etc., people can show different responses and, according to Button (1983), the ability to maintain a flexible and relatively stable self-construction is crucial in order to not develop psychological disorders or overcome temporary crises or transitions. Useful definitions of relevant notions in the PCT are summarized in *Table 1* which is a extract of the data presented in Cipolletta & Ortu, 2021

Table 1. *Definitions of relevant notions in the Personal Construct Theory (Cipolletta & Ortu, 2021)*

<i>Professional construct</i>	<i>Definition</i>
<i>Anxiety</i>	The awareness that the events with which one is confronted lie mostly outside the range of convenience of one’s construct system.
<i>Threat</i>	The awareness of an imminent comprehensive change of core structures.
<i>Guilt</i>	The awareness of dislodgement of the self from one’s core role structure.
<i>Hostility</i>	The continued effort to extort validation evidence in favor of a type of social prediction which has already been recognized as a failure.
<i>Aggression</i>	The active elaboration of one’s perceptual field.
<i>Constriction</i>	When a person narrows his or her perceptual field in order to minimize apparent incompatibilities.
<i>Dilation</i>	When a person broadens his or her perceptual field in order to reorganize it on a more comprehensive level. It does not, in itself, include the comprehensive reconstruction of those elements.

2.2 Defining well-being

Definitions provided in the previous paragraph underlined a relationship between health and well-being, however, to better understand what well-being is and which are its determinants and implications, we need to further explore this complex and multi-faceted concept.

According to Ryan and Deci (2001), for much of the last century, psychology focused more on the amelioration of psychopathology rather than the promotion of well-being. Recently the perspective has changed, as well-being is not yet considered as the absence of mental illness as well

as positive emotions are not simply defined by the absence of negative emotions (Hamilton-West, 2011). The growing interest in this topic has led to the development of several models, attempting to understand why individuals differ in their ability to experience positive psychological states and develop interventions aimed to promote positive psychological outcomes. Many disciplines and professionals have referred to well-being emphasizing their own unique perspective (e.g. economists and politicians focused on finance, prosperity, per-capita product and jobs, while health and medical professionals assessed well-being through lab tests and imaging, etc.; Halbreich 2022), contributing and at the same time accounting for the complexity of the concept of well-being. One's well-being is indeed influenced by physical and emotional health, daily functions, financial status and social interaction (Halbreich, 2022) which, together, determine whether the personal state experienced is positive or negative. Tov (2018) reviewed various conceptions of well-being and how its different components have been measured and studied in the psychological literature. First, he recognizes well-being as a "broad and multifaceted construct", which has been indeed defined and measured in many different ways. Numerous scholars have tried to define well-being and, according to Ryan & Deci (2001), there are two principal approaches to define and measure well-being: the hedonic and the eudaimonic approach. According to the hedonic approach, which refers to well-being as subjective well-being, people evaluate their own lives based on their expectations, values and previous experiences (Deiner, Shu, Lucas & Smith, 1977 cited in Hamilton-West, 2011). Depending on personal evaluations, one's level of subjective well-being cannot be predicted simply by knowing about his or her life circumstances, however available resources, environmental factors and life events affect subjective well-being when they are relevant to the individual's goals. For example, the degree to which a nation can meet the basic human needs of its people seems a strong predictor of subjective well-being (Deiner, 1995 cited in Hamilton-West, 2011). Also the association between personality traits and subjective well-being has been assessed, finding an association between personality traits (e.g. extraversion and low neuroticism) and subjective well-being (Arshad et al., 2016; Costa & McCrae, 1980; Lykken &

Tellegen, 1996 cited in Hamilton-West, 2011). On the other hand, the eudaimonic approach considers the existence of needs and qualities (e.g. autonomy, positive relations, environmental mastery, self-acceptance, purpose in life and personal growth; Ryff, 1989) that are essential to reach and fulfill in order to function well. It refers to well-being as *psychological well-being* and, differing from the subjective well-being, which has to do with happiness experienced by the individual, the eudaimonic approach focuses on meaning and self-realization (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Psychological well-being seems to be tied to biological functioning as higher levels of psychological well-being and positive relationships with others are linked to lower levels of cortisol, proinflammatory cytokines and cardiovascular risk, which are not strongly associated with subjective well-being.

Despite divisions over definitional and philosophical issues, the hedonic and eudaimonic approach complement each other (Ryan & Deci, 2001), capturing multiple aspects of well-being. In general, research provided evidence that positive emotions and higher levels of well-being facilitate adaptive outcomes (Hamilton-West, 2011). People with higher levels of well-being show higher self-esteem, life satisfaction, better social relationships, socioeconomic status and physical health, compared to those with lower levels of well-being. Lower levels of well-being are linked to mental health problems, psychological distress (e.g. anxiety, depression, social isolation, loneliness, etc.; Bhagchandani, 2019) and physical impairments (e.g. cardiovascular disease, hormone imbalance, etc.).

As reported in Negovan (2010), besides its subjective and psychological components, well-being is considered encompassing also a third dimension, which has been introduced by Keyes (1998) and referred to as *social well-being*. Keyes (1998), attempting to overcome the conceptualization of well-being as a primarily private phenomenon, underlines the role played by the society and social health on one's well-being and he defines social well-being as "the appraisal of one's circumstance and functioning in society" (p. 122), identifying five dimensions of social well-being, capable to indicate whether individuals are functioning well in the society and to what

extent. According to Keyes (1998), in order to function well in the society, people need to feel to have something in common with other members of the society, which they feel they are part of (i.e. social integration), they also need to trust others, considering they are capable of kindness (i.e. social acceptance) as well as consider themselves a vital member of the society (i.e. social contribution). Also believing in the potential of the society and being hopeful about its future condition (i.e. social actualization) and perceiving quality, organization and feeling to be able to understand what is happening around them (i.e. social coherence), allows individuals to support their social well-being. Another important aspect introduced by Keyes (1998) concerns the role of society as a source of social well-being, capable of influencing individuals social well-being through several factors (e.g. socioeconomic status, education, etc.).

Gallagher et al. (2009) attempted to determine the relationships among hedonic, eudaimonic and social well-being, examining if the three models could be integrated into one model of well-being. According to Gallagher et al. (2009), the relationship among three models as well as their components, seems to be best represented by a hierarchical model containing hedonic, eudaimonic and social well-being as second-order factors, underlining the theoretical distinction between the three dimensions of well-being, and their respective components as third-order factors. Even if data supports a distinction among hedonic, eudaimonic and social well-being, they also demonstrate a strong association between them, supporting the idea that these three dimensions of well-being covary across time, influencing each other (Gallagher et al., 2009).

The concept of psychosocial well-being has been indeed introduced accounting for the idea that it represents a multidimensional construct, influenced by several factors, including psychological, mental, physical and social aspects. Burns (2017) defined psychosocial well-being in terms of “inter- and intraindividual levels of positive functioning that can include one's relatedness with others and self referent attitudes that include one's sense of mastery and personal growth, along with resources to cope with everyday demands and challenges" (Schmidt, 2022, p. 2).

2.3 What about college students' well-being?

As the onset of most lifetime mental disorders occurs during adolescence and college years (Liu, Ping, Gao, 2019), and the number of students seeking support for mental health difficulties has increased (Auerbach et al., 2018), this stage of life seems to deserve attention. However little published research explored how the university experience affects student well-being and which are its predictors and correlates (Brett et al., 2022). College students are exposed to a number of stressors such as academic pressures, uncertain future, difficulties of integrating into the system (Akhtar & Kroener-Herwig, 2019), moving far from family and friends, make new social connections, manage finances, manage a household and their own time (Brett et al., 2022). In general, there are many factors which can affect students' well-being. A research investigating key determinants of well-being amongst a sample of 574 students enrolled in a university in the U.K. found that 91.8% of college students reported feeling unusually stressed or overwhelmed at university (Brett et al., 2022). The hierarchical regression analyses showed that 71.8% of well-being variance was predicted by demographics (age, gender, level of study, number of stressors) and psychological variables (perceived stress, sense of coherence, loneliness and resilience were the strongest predictors; Brett et al. 2022).

Transition to university requires rapid adjustment and personal resources (Lipson & Eisenberg, 2018 in Brett et al., 2022) and it might lead to psychological distress and lower physical and psychological well-being, affecting both academic performance and overall life satisfaction of college students.

As regard international college students, research often focused on stressors and challenges faced by this population, devoting little space to studies aimed to explore factors capable of positively supporting their well-being (Alharbi & Smith, 2018). However, some studies (Akhtar & Kroener-Herwig, 2019; Bhagchandani, 2019; Cipolletta et al., 2021; Cho & Yu, 2015; Rosenthal et al., 2006; Sumer et al. 2011; Zhang & Goodson, 2010) focused on international students' well-being, attempting to identify its correlates and taking into account peculiarities of this

population.

As widely mentioned in previous paragraphs, international college students have to deal with substantial changes while studying abroad. Moving far from home and meeting a new cultural environment as well as a new academic environment, they are meant to adapt to the new context in order to achieve their academic and personal goals. Available literature (e.g. Alharbi & Smith, 2018; Sumer et al., 2011; Zhang & Goodson, 2011) shows a connection between well-being and international students' ability to succeed in the acculturation process. A recent review, aimed to address the major sources of stress experienced by international students, found that acculturative stress is the most discussed stressor in literature (Alharbi & Smith, 2018). In particular, acculturative stress is used to understand international students' psychological difficulties (Alharbi & Smith, 2018) as adjusting to a new educational and social environment can be a stressful experience (Sumer et al., 2011). According to Zhang and Goodson (2011) the majority of studies exploring predictors of international students' adjustment, adopted Ward et al. 's distinction of psychological and sociocultural adjustment. Psychological adjustment ("psychological well-being or satisfaction", Zhang & Goodson, 2011, p.140) and sociocultural adjustment ("the ability to 'fit in', to acquire culturally appropriate skills and to negotiate interactive aspects of the host environment", Zhang & Goodson, 2011, p. 140) are considered "two inter-related yet distinct domains of intercultural adaptation" (Zhang & Goodson, 2011, p. 141). Among outcomes considered as measuring psychological adjustment, Zhang & Goodson (2011) identified both outcomes of negative adjustment (e.g. psychological symptoms, stress, acculturative stress, physical symptoms) and positive adjustment (e.g. satisfaction with life). Accordingly, Can et al. (2021) found that the level of general adjustment problems predicted psychological well-being among their sample of 145 international college students. Results showed that individuals who experienced less adjustment problems had higher levels of well-being compared to those who struggled in adjusting to the new environment. According to Kilinc and Granello (2003) international students who showed lower levels of acculturation experienced more difficulty in their academic life, with

language and physical health compared to those who succeeded in the acculturation process (Sumer et al., 2011).

Studies aimed to identify predictors of adjustment among international students' population found several factors able to affect international students' ability to adapt to the new cultural and academic context, influencing their well-being. Berry (1997) proposed an acculturation framework to explain the long-term adjustment process for individuals living in foreign countries, finding that factors involved in the acculturation process have to do with aspects prior to acculturation as well as factors occurring during the process of acculturation (Wang et al., 2015).

As regards international students, several predictors of positive and negative adjustment have been assessed. One of the most recent literature reviews conducted by Alharbi and Smith (2018) explored 38 studies conducted in the U.S. identifying the most cited sources of stress international students are exposed to which consist of acculturative stress, english-language proficiency, perceived discrimination, loneliness and academic stress. Also individual differences have been considered, highlighting the impact of demographic variables (e.g. gender, age and ethnicity), coping strategies, social support, personality traits and length of stay on foreign students' level of adjustment.

Despite the lack of interventions aimed to specifically promote international students' adjustment and well-being (Alharbi & Smith, 2018) makes it hard to identify best practices which should be implemented by universities, literature provides evidence concerning possible ways to promote international students' well-being.

As discussed in paragraph 1.3, among variables affecting international students' well-being, social support seems to be particularly relevant as it has been considered one of the main aspects determining international students' psychological well-being (Cho & Yu, 2015) and it represents the most studied variable in relation to health (Huppert, 2009). Higher levels of well-being shown by local students, compared to international students, have been explained in relation to the fact that they have greater access to companionship and support from their family, which partially remove

personal stressors associated with transition to university (Brett et al., 2022). As perceived social support is strongly related to the psychological and social adjustment of international students (Mesidor & Sly, 2016), interventions aimed to improve social connectedness among international students seems to be particularly relevant.

According to literature, social support and social connectedness represent the most essential contributor to international students' psychological well-being (Cho & Yu, 2015; Martirosyan et al. 2015 cited in Worae & Edgerton, 2023), in particular relationships with local peers represent a valuable resource, able to ease the adjustment process faced by international students and foster their well-being (Celik et al., 2023). Several authors have proposed possible ways to promote social connectedness among local and international students, for example, encouraging international students to join programmes involving domestic students (Yeh & Inose, 2003) or pairing international students with local students at the beginning of the semester (Sumer et al., 2011).

According to Martirosyan et al. (2015) foreign students' adjustment is linked to one's ability to establish social connections through several activities (e.g. peer groups, clubs, etc.; Bender et al., 2019), which should be considered by universities, representing crucial sources of support for foreign students. Cho and Yu (2015) applying the concept of organizational support to university contexts, found that, in addition to interpersonal support, university support is a key factor in determining international students' well-being (evaluated through measures of psychological stress and school-life satisfaction; Cho and Yu, 2015). In a study conducted in the U.S. involving 186 international students, perceived support from school was the only significant predictor of acculturative stress when other variables (e.g. english proficiency, academic achievement) were controlled (Bai, 2016).

Universities could support international students' adaptation and adjustment in several ways, for example giving foreign students useful information (e.g. through universities websites) seems to be an effective way to help international students to adjust to the new academic environment (Can et al., 2019). According to Can et al. (2019), when international students arrive on campus for the

first time, they should be informed about available services (e.g. orientation programmes, health and counseling services, etc.), the education system, clubs and organizations, cross-cultural experiences and all the services which can lead to a better adjustment. As mentioned in *paragraph 1.3*, many studies underlined the importance of creating social ties between domestic and international students. However, improving connections between international students from different countries could also represent a valuable strategy (Colvin & Jaffar, 2007). Colvin and Jaffar (2007) explored the benefits of ethnic student groups as effective support tools for international students.

Although groups “owned” by international students have greater success than those managed by the university, Colvin and Jaffar (2007) observed that student groups alone are not an adequate support strategy and the presence of specialist staff is needed. According to Brown (2009), researches focusing on interaction patterns among international students’ population (e.g. Barker et al., 1991; Bochner et al., 1977; Brown & Peacock, 2007; Cushner & Karim, 2004; de Vita, 2005; Furnham & Trezise, 1983; Klineberg & Hull, 1979; Leask, 2007; Pruitt, 1978; Richardson, 1991; Rogers & Smith, 1992; Ward et al., 2005), noted that the most common interaction pattern is the “monocultural bond”, also defined in terms of “ghetto pattern” (Brown, 2009, p. 185). Although having compatriot friends seems to be associated with a reduction in loneliness and stress, this kind of relationship does not allow international students to develop knowledge of the culture and language of the host country (Brown, 2009). According to many authors (e.g. Bochner, 1981; Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Gudykunst, 1998; Ward et al., 2001), multiculturalism represents a valuable acculturation strategy, allowing foreign students to broaden their network of relationships, acquiring multicultural attitudes and skills (Brown, 2009).

Also, programs aimed at facilitating socialization among international students should be complemented by those aimed at creating a social network between international and local students, without being mutually exclusive (Al-Sharideh & Goe, 1998; Colvin & Jaffar, 2007; Kashima & Loh, 2006; Li & Gasser, 2005; Ying & Han, 2006; Ying & Liese, 1994; Zhang & Goodson, 2011

cited in Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Accordingly, a recent study involving international students enrolled in the University of Padua, found a correlation between higher dispersion of dependency, higher perceived social support, lower distress and higher levels of well-being (Cipolletta et al., 2021). Dispersion of dependency represents a construct introduced by Kelly within personal construct psychology theoretical framework, accounting for the way in which people relate to others to satisfy their needs. People who show higher levels of dispersion of dependency, can refer to different resources to satisfy their needs, while people who concentrate dependency on few resources result in lower levels of dispersion of dependency (Cipolletta et al., 2021). From this perspective, helping international students to find new sources of support, broadening their network of relationships, should be considered in order to enhance their well-being, as these two aspects seem to correlate between each other (Cipolletta et al., 2021).

For example pairing international students at the beginning of their experience with “expert” international students could serve as a resource, helping new foreign students to adjust to the new environment at the same time broadening their social network (Sumer et al., 2011). And group counseling involving international students could be useful to normalize - rather than personalize - the difficulties of studying abroad, as well as promote social connectedness (Dipeolu et al., 2007).

3. The importance of developing interventions to support international students’ well-being: state of the art

International students’ well-being seems to be affected by multiple factors, both in a positive and negative way. Enhancing international students’ well-being is a fundamental responsibility, not only to make their experience abroad enjoyable but also to meet their overarching needs as human beings. For this reason, host communities and universities, which also benefit from the incoming of foreign students both from a human and economical point of view, should take care of this population, implementing interventions and services aimed to support international students’ well-being, health and quality of life. Higher levels of psychological well-being are indeed linked

to success in all fields, higher levels of satisfaction and self-esteem, positive characteristics of growth and development (Bhagchandani, 2019). In order to support international students' well-being and adjustment to the new cultural and academic environment, interventions should focus on predictors of international students adaptation and well-being. In 2019, the World Health Organization shared the World Mental Health International College Student initiative (Cuijpers et al., 2019), aimed at promoting the development of interventions addressing international college students' psychological and physical well-being. One consequence associated with the awareness that well-being cannot be fully represented by one measure concerns interventions aimed at promoting it.

As well-being is a subjective experience as well as influenced by many factors, intervention aimed to enhance individuals' well-being might improve some of its aspects but not others (Tov, 2018). Several authors have taken care of designing and applying interventions in this field, particularly addressing loneliness, social support and social isolation as crucial aspects affecting international students' well-being. Evidence from literature will be discussed in the next paragraph, also considering the potentiality of digital interventions.

3.1 Interventions to address loneliness and social isolation

According to Wang et al. (2015) social factors need to be taken into account when helping international students with their academic adjustment. Some interventions aimed to promote social connectedness and increase levels of social support among international students have been conducted, however the majority of available data have been collected among other populations (e.g. older adults, adults, adolescents, etc.), finding that group interventions seem more successful than individual ones (Eccles & Qualter, 2021). A recent review (Zagic et al., 2022) compared the effectiveness of several interventions aimed to improve social connectedness, distinguishing between subjective and objective continua of social connections. As reported in their paper, *objective social contact* refers to the continuum characterized by the contrast between social

isolation and social participation, while the *quality of social connections* has to do with the contrast between social connectedness and loneliness as opposite ends of one continuum.

According to Zagic et al. (2022) interventions aimed to promote social access were linked to increasing objective social contact, on the other hand, interventions designed to provide psychological strategies to manage social difficulties and distress, led to increased quality of social connections. From this perspective, interventions aimed to increase the size of social networks are most effective when delivered within a group format, while the quality of social connections is improved most effectively through direct and practical strategies (Zagic et al., 2022). Despite Zagic et al.'s (2022) review highlighted the absence of significant effects of social access interventions in improving social connections, authors suggest that “The effects of social access interventions can potentially be improved by matching individuals with shared interests and/ or by structuring them as opportunities to address underlying psychological factors maintaining disconnection” (p. 901).

Haslam et al. (2019) designed an intervention (Groups 4 Health - G4H) aimed to reduce loneliness and social anxiety in adults with psychological distress. According to the social identity theory framework, Haslam et al. (2019), focused on the building and maintenance of positive social group identifications as positively affecting one's well-being. Groups were indeed formed by 5 to 9 people sharing common experiences (i.e. diagnosed with a mental illness or reported symptoms of clinical depression), offering them the possibility to learn and talk about difficulties with other people facing similar challenges (Haslam et al., 2019). Sessions were conducted by two provisionally registered psychologists specifically trained in delivery of the designed programme. Authors examined G4H efficacy pointing out the value of targeting positive group identification as a strategy for reducing loneliness.

Another intervention targeting the medical student population (Gold et al, 2019) has been designed and implemented in order to encourage connectedness among peers, teach coping and emotional self-awareness skills, increase empathy and decrease loneliness. Similarly to Haslam et. al (2019), Gold and colleagues (2019) designed their intervention involving a group of students

rather than conducting individual sessions of counseling. Defining the group as a *reflection group* rather than *support group*, Gold et al. (2019) attempted to “destigmatize participation” (Gold et al., 2019, p. 376). Meetings were conducted by trained facilitators, who explicitly discussed expectations and confidentiality with participants, guided the conversation, promoted shared experiences and encouraged respect for diverse opinions and self-reflection, at the same time letting participants generate content. A thematic analysis has been conducted by Gold et al. (2019) collecting information related to takeaways from group participation. One of the main themes had to do with the positive effect of sharing experiences, which made students realize that they were not alone.

Both quantitative and qualitative data showed improved connection with others and decreased loneliness, while levels of well-being did not increase at the end of the intervention. According to Gold et al. (2019) this result could be explained by the fact that the intervention did not directly address well-being and improving social connectedness might allow for an improvement in well-being over time. However, according to their results, reflection groups may be an effective intervention to promote social connectedness among medical students, who represent a vulnerable student population, subjected to a number of stressors.

Another attempt to reduce social isolation and loneliness among young people involved formal youth mentoring (Keller et al., 2020). According to authors, young people suffering from loneliness and social isolation often lack strong and supportive relationships with non-parental adults and mentoring programs have shown positive outcomes on several domains (e.g. health, social, academic, etc.; DuBois et al, 2002, 2011 cited in Keller et al., 2020). Formal youth mentoring programs can be shaped and implemented differently according to the context, goals and outcomes as well as the types of mentor recruited and the structure of mentor relationships. Mentor programs can indeed involve both adults and peers, in group or one-to-one relationships (Keller et al., 2020) and, in general, they seem to support young people’s well-being by reducing social isolation and promoting supportive relationships.

As regards international college students, group interventions are considered the most effective for the international student population (Yakunina et al., 2010). Several researches (Carr et al., 2003; Dipeolu et al., 2007; Walker & Conyne, 2007; Yakunina et al., 2010) found that support group approaches might be effective in reducing foreign students' social isolation and loneliness, increasing social support and social connectedness as well as providing a safe place to practice language (Parsath et al., 2021). Parsath and colleagues (2021) implemented an intervention aimed to develop positive psychological strengths and promote mental health and well-being among international students enrolled in a University in the U.S. Parsath et al. (2021) employed both traditional talk therapy and creative modalities of intervention, recognizing that international students often struggle with linguistic barriers.

According to Degges-White and Davis (2017), using expressive, creative and artistic methods in therapy (e.g. visual and auditory arts), defined as modalities of expressions which do not necessarily require a good linguistic proficiency, transcending the traditional talk therapy in exploring, expressing and processing experiences, "deepens the healing process, accelerates diagnosis, treatment and intervention" (Parsath et al., 2021, p. 3). Parsath et al.'s (2021) protocol intervention differs from previous programs as it aims to emphasize the inherent abilities of a person or a group to help them achieve and maintain their well-being, rather than reduce undesirable negative outcomes linked to acculturative challenges (e.g. cultural misunderstanding, racial discrimination, language barriers, etc.) faced by international students, which are often out of their control. Meetings were conducted by facilitators (master level students) and a counselor educator was present providing supervision at the end of each session. The program lasted 8 weeks, each session started with an engaging, quick and fun activity, then the discussion began. Each meeting was driven by a purpose, introduced by the facilitator and developed following participants' discussion and interests. Thematic analysis has been adopted to examine the participants' group feedback and identify commonalities, identifying three main themes. According to Parsath and colleagues (2021), students seem to have benefited from the exposure to their own

psychological strengths enhancing the awareness of their resources. Also, international students recognized the importance of having such systems of support as well as the impact the experience had on their well-being (Parsath et al., 2021). Parsath and colleagues (2021) recommend group facilitators to actively engage with participants for ease of openness among students and invite facilitators to reflect on their own experiences and to be open to reciprocal learning.

According to Osborn et al.'s (2021) review of evidence on acceptability and effectiveness of interventions to address loneliness and social isolation in young people, the majority of interventions they took into consideration, targeted at specific "at risk" populations conducting high intensity, individual or small group interventions and all interventions consisted of multiple sessions (i.e. from 8 to 22, Osborn et al., 2021, p. 73). Among interventions included into their sample, those delivered in institutional settings (e.g. school, university), rather than informal settings, seem to be more acceptable and/or effective. Limitations in delivering and evaluating such interventions have also been identified. As reported in Osborn et al. (2021) "there was lack of clarity on what most of the interventions included, heterogeneity in the way loneliness or social isolation was measured and very limited assessments on whether they were implemented as originally intended" (p.75). Most of the interventions were also evaluated using non-experimental study designs, which made it difficult to understand whether they were effective in reducing social isolation and loneliness and how, due to lack of theoretical framework.

3.2 Digital tools and social media: a new resource to promote well-being?

In the last two decades, the usage of Internet and technological devices has increased, becoming part of one's daily life, changing the way people communicate, work and so on (Moretta & Buodo, 2020). Despite literature providing evidence of several adverse consequences of *problematic internet use* or *internet addiction* (Moretta & Buodo, 2020), new technologies are also seen as a potential resource which might be used to improve people's well-being and mental health becoming a modality to deliver psychological interventions. In fact, psychological internet-based

intervention could make psychological services more accessible, acceptable and less expensive than face-to-face services (Ferrari et al., 2022).

As reported in Ferrari et al. (2022) there have been recent calls to develop digital psychological interventions for university students. In general, attempts to develop internet-based interventions increased during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, due to the promotion of quarantine, social distancing and closing of in-presence services (Borg et al., 2022). According to several authors (e.g. Becker & Torus, 2019; Harith et al., 2022; Lattie et al., 2019) internet-based interventions seem to show small to moderate effects in improving well-being (Ferrari et al., 2022) and producing beneficial changes in the main psychological outcomes variables (Lattie et al., 2019). However, these interventions show a large diversity both as regards the interventions and employed technologies (De Witte et al., 2021) and, even showing promising short-term effects on several psychological outcomes (e.g. depression, anxiety, etc.) compared to waitlist controls, their long-term effects remain uncertain (Becker & Torus, 2019). Also, in Harrer et al.,'s (2019) review, positive effects on well-being provided by internet-based interventions were not found and effects on depression, anxiety and stress symptoms were small. In Borg et al.'s (2022) review, internet-based interventions did not show any significant effect in decreasing levels of depression. Both Harrer et al. (2022) and Borg et al. (2022) analysis were not always in line with previous studies.

Both reviews took into account internet-based interventions delivered to peculiar populations (e.g. college students, Harrer et al, 2022) or in peculiar contexts (e.g. COVID-19 pandemic, Borg et al., 2022), concluding that internet-based interventions can be potentially effective for several conditions, but more research is needed in order to understand which types of interventions best fit which population and in which context. In general, in order to design selective and targeted internet-based interventions, which can have several advantages in improving quality of care and active user involvement (De Witte et al., 2021), more research is needed (Harith et al., 2022; Harrer et al., 2019). Despite limitations mentioned, literature provides some useful data to better

understand how digital tools have been used to deliver psychological interventions.

In general, *Acceptance and Commitment* and *Cognitive Behavioral Therapy* are the most adopted theoretical framework in designing internet-based interventions (De Witte et al., 2021; Ferrari et al., 2022), showing promising short-term effects on measurements of anxiety, depression and sleep in the college students' population (Becker & Torus, 2019). As regards college students, Harrer et al. (2022) found higher effects for interventions involving participants who were not given any compensation and were recruited through a study subject pool. Most effective interventions were those lasting from 4 to 8 weeks, based on CBT principles and compared with passive control groups (Harrer et al., 2022). However, if the internet-based intervention aims to reduce depressive symptoms, most effective interventions seem to be the longer ones compared to shorter ones (Christansen et al., 2006). According to De Witte et al.'s (2021) review, examining the effectiveness of technological and digital interventions addressing mental health and wellbeing in the context of care and welfare, such programs vary in focus and target populations. The majority of internet-based interventions reviewed by De Witte et al. (2021) were delivered through computers and smartphones, with interventions provided by smartphone applications primarily focusing on self-help, combining behavioral and psychotherapeutic interventions. De Witte and colleagues (2021) highlighted that blended interventions, combining online and face-to-face practices, are largely absent from available resources. However, blended interventions are often cited as "the most promising avenue for technological and digital interventions in care and welfare" (De Witte et al., 2021, p. 7). In addition to the potential effectiveness of internet-based interventions in reducing psychological symptoms, promoting strategies to manage psychological distress and enhance one's well-being, digital interventions seem to facilitate help-seeking behaviors and mitigate some barriers to mental healthcare, modifying one's attitudes towards help-seeking (Evans-Lacko et al., 2022). Reviewing 35 interventions, Evans-Lacko et al. (2022), pointed out that 51% of internet-based interventions promoted an improvement in help-seeking intentions, and 29% showed an improvement in actual help-seeking behavior, concluding that internet-based interventions seem

to be promising practices to facilitate help-seeking (Evans-Lacko et al., 2022)

Another crucial consideration when evaluating interventions' effectiveness has to do with the severity of symptoms at baseline, which influences treatment effects (Bower et al., 2013; Fournier et al., 2010). Bower et al. (2013) considered an internet-based intervention aimed to reduce depression, finding that participants who showed higher levels of depression at baseline, reported larger treatment effects compared to participants lower in depression at baseline. Also Harrer et al. (2022) conducting a subgroup analysis, found higher effects of internet-based interventions when addressing "at risk" college students population, compared to those who did not meet clinical cut-offs.. According to this perspective, supported by several studies (e.g. Fournier et al., 2010; Harrer et al., 2022) the severity of symptoms at baseline needs to be taken into account when evaluating the effectiveness of an intervention.

4. COVID-19 and international students' mobility in Italy: useful data to understand the phenomenon today

In the next two paragraphs, an overview of the current context will be provided. In particular changes related to the COVID-19 pandemic will be discussed, as they significantly affected the tertiary education sector (e.g. Alaklabi et al, 2021; Bilcen, B., 2020; Chen & Li, 2020). Data related to international students' mobility in Italy and Padua will be briefly presented.

4.1 A new chapter: COVID-19 and the effect of the pandemic

Since the first case affected by CoronaVirus Disease (COVID-19) was identified in Wuhan (China) in December 2019 (WHO, 2020), the entire world has undergone radical changes, making the COVID-19 pandemic the "defining global health crisis of our time" (Firang, 2020; Spatafora et al, 2022). Most countries called for a lockdown and adopted restrictive prevention measures in order to contain the infection. Altering usual activities and routines, measures to reduce transmission of the virus have had a significant impact on people's mental health and well-being (Allen et al., 2021; O'Connor et al., 2020) and have led to a psychological crisis (Talevi et al.,

2020). Restrictive measures such as quarantine, isolation and social distancing negatively impacted on people's well-being and affected their emotive reactions to pandemic itself (Talevi et al., 2020). Several studies conducted in the initial stages of the pandemic provided evidence that anxiety, depression, stress, suicide risk and post-traumatic stress were the most common symptoms among the population worldwide (O'Connor et al., 2020). Due to physical distancing, promoted as a measure to contain the spread of infection, people experienced social isolation (Spatafora et al., 2022). According to Banerjee and Rai (2020) social isolation leads to chronic loneliness and boredom which can have detrimental effects on people's physical and mental health and well-being. Even though COVID-19 pandemic effects have affected the entire world population physically, mentally and economically, research has identified groups which have been exposed to a higher risk of developing mental-health related problems due to the pandemic and its restrictions (e.g. older adults, people affected by mental disorders, people experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage; O'Connor et al., 2020).

Being a college student was identified as one of many risk factors for developing mental health problems during the pandemic as the spread of COVID-19 pandemic has deeply affected the tertiary education sector (e.g. Alaklabi et al, 2021; Bilcen, B., 2020; Chen & Li, 2020). College students had to deal with many changes regarding both their everyday life and their academic experience. Many countries suspended in-person educational instruction, adopting the remote learning model of delivery and the closure of schools lead to the suspension of food services, medical health support and housing (Alaklabi et al., 2021). Both local and international students have been exposed to changes which affected their academic experience as well as their well-being and mental health. College students had to deal with many challenges as, for example, stress related to the online teaching paradigm, delayed graduation concerns, worry about self and family health, uncertainties of future employment, change in the studying and working environment, and social isolation (Xiaomei et al. 2020). Even during the pandemic, international college students have been recognized as a vulnerable population compared to local students (Firang, 2020; Mbous et al, 2022).

Xiaomei and colleagues (2020) pointed out that both international and domestic students reported similar challenges faced during the spread of COVID-19 such as stress related to the online teaching, delayed graduation concerns, worry about self and family health, uncertainties of future employment, change in the studying/working environment and social isolation (Mbous et al., 2022). Most of the challenges stem from governments' decision to call for a lockdown, closing universities and workspace and promoting physical distancing and quarantine.

Although both international and local students faced the same changes, international students were already a more vulnerable population compared to domestic students (e.g. Morris et al., 2020; Karyotaki et al., 2020; Poyrazli et al. 2004) and pandemic-related challenges added to the previous ones, exacerbating international students' mental health risk factors and other health concerns, jeopardizing their academic success (Mbous et al., 2022). As reported by Chirikov et al. (2020) compared to 2019, the prevalence of major depressive disorder has doubled among international students and the prevalence of generalized anxiety has increased 1.5 times. Moreover, students enrolled in foreign universities had to deal with unique challenges compared to local peers, especially regarding immigration policies and pandemic-related border closing (Mbous et al., 2022). Several studies exploring international students' experiences during the spread of the pandemic pointed out that not all international students had the possibility to return to their countries of origin, while the majority of local students could (Alaklabi et al., 2021; Bilecen, 2020).

International students who stayed in their host countries have unmet psychological needs of relatedness due to the separation from their loved ones as well as for lack of social support (Chen & Li, 2020), accentuating international students' feelings of loneliness and homesickness (Mbous et al., 2022). Students who stayed in the host country struggled in accessing health care and services due to cultural and linguistic barriers (Chen & Li, 2020) and especially those from Asia, experienced social exclusion, xenophobic attitudes and became victims of discrimination and verbal assaults (Bilecen, 2020; Chen & Li, 2020). Even those who managed to return back home had to deal with the difficulty of following lectures remotely, being motivated, focused and productive

(Mbous et al., 2022). Despite that, a study conducted in the U.S. and U.K. found that stayers experienced more adverse mental health impacts than those who could return in the home country (Lai et al., 2020). Common challenges included financial difficulties, housing, food insecurities as well as challenges with remote learning and online academic environment (Hari et al., 2021). The shift from in-person to online learning has been particularly considered by researchers as many international students, often belonging to disadvantaged families, were not adequately prepared to face this transition (Alaklabi et al., 2021). E-learning has amplified inequalities in education (Hari et al., 2021; Alaklabi et al., 2021) requiring access to specific information and infrastructure which are generally available for local students but not for international ones who were more likely to drop out their studies compared to locals (Alaklabi et al., 2021).

International students were already in a precarious situation which deteriorated during and after the pandemic (Morris et al., 2020). As the COVID-19 pandemic is a recent event, its effects are not yet well-known. However, available data show that the pandemic has had effects - often devastating - on people's mental health and well-being and many authors pointed out that long-lasting effects are expected (Di Pietro et al., 2020; Hari et al., 2021; Spatafora et al., 2022; Talevi et al. 2020). According to this perspective universities and organizations involved in the international students' mobility are meant to take into account that international students could still be affected by concerns and vulnerabilities due to the pandemic.

4.2 International students' mobility in Italy and in Padua

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, international students' mobility has increased over the past two decades (OECD, 2020) involving countries and universities worldwide. Countries such as the United States, United Kingdom and Australia have always stood out as the main destinations of international students' mobility flow. However, several research highlights that the increase in the number of students enrolled in foreign universities is involving different countries all over the world, including Italy (Ferrario, 2023). Among the European countries, Italy represents one of the top destinations for international students. While other European countries have already

played an important role in international mobility since 1999, Italy has been part of the rankings since 2006 (Choudaha, 2017). According to the MIUR statistics the number of international students enrolled in Italian universities has increased by 62% between the historical series 2010/2011-2020/2021, with a 9% reduction caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (Ferrario, 2023). In 2020/2021, 14.468 students were engaged in international mobility programmes in Italy of which 1.201 enrolled in universities in Veneto (MIUR, 2021).

Very few studies (Aiello et al, 2021; Celik et al., 2023; Cipolletta et al., 2022) have been conducted in Italy in order to explore the experience of international students enrolled in Italian universities. It seems, however, necessary to deepen the knowledge of this phenomenon in order to meet international students' needs and take care of their condition.

5. The present study: starting points and structure

As very few interventions aimed to promote international students' well-being have been conducted and properly assessed (Alharbi & Smith, 2018), it seems particularly relevant to design intervention in this direction and, in order to implement useful interventions in the university context, understanding the peculiar needs of international students is necessary. Needs and challenges faced by international students, as well as available resources and services, change depending on many factors including the characteristics of the host country and university. Exploring the experience of international students enrolled in the University of Padua could highlight peculiar aspects characterizing the experience of studying abroad in Italy, which has not been considered by much research (Celik et al., 2023). Collecting information related to the Italian context, which may differ significantly from the countries where the largest number of studies have been conducted (e.g. English-speaking countries), is therefore necessary as well as implementing and evaluating interventions designed taking into consideration evidence and suggestions from available literature.

In this thesis, experiences of international students enrolled in the University of Padua will

be explored, analyzing data collected during a pilot study consisting in a blended psychosocial group intervention, designed and delivered by the research team aiming to promote international students' social connectedness and well-being through both in-presence meetings and online self-help materials. Adopting a multidimensional perspective on well-being, which includes several aspects such as psychological, social, relational, cultural, economical, educational variables etc. and especially the PCT theoretical framework (Kelly, 1955), authors have developed and implemented an intervention and action-research accordingly with the aim of promoting international students' well-being and social connectedness. The PCT framework (Kelly, 1955), allowed researchers and participants to experience and elaborate participants' personal meanings and constructs related to the experience of studying abroad, well-being and socialization with peers, focusing on the exploration and joint construction of potential trajectories of well-being and the creation of meaningful relationships. This was possible as the phenomenological approach does not define elements and the importance of well-being and socialization *a priori*, giving participants the opportunity to explore and broaden their own systems of constructs, and researchers the opportunity to explore participants' common and specific narrations of such events and personal meanings.

This perspective was maintained as well for the creation of the self-help materials. In fact participants were proposed activities that supported personal elaboration on different topics such as social connectedness, well-being, the use of digital tools, the exploration of available resources and their meaning, and more.

In the second chapter the methodology related to both the development of the psychosocial group intervention and the subsequent qualitative analysis of international students' experiences will be discussed, while qualitative data obtained from a thematic analysis of contents collected during group meetings will be presented and discussed in the last two chapters, attempting to provide an interpretation based on the personal construct theoretical framework.

Chapter 2: Methodology

The research presented in this thesis aimed to explore experiences of international students enrolled in the University of Padua, participating in a blended psychosocial group interventions involving an in-presence group activity and online self-help materials, to promote international students' well-being and social connectedness. The present study reports and discusses the qualitative data collected during the in-presence psychosocial group activity and is part of a larger research project to assess the effectiveness of the intervention developed and implemented, consisting of a larger study involving three different experimental conditions. Specifically the experimental conditions were:

- blended condition: participants taking part into an in-person psychosocial group intervention while receiving the online self-help materials via email.
- online condition: participants only receiving the online self-help materials via email.
- control condition: participants not taking part in any intervention.

In the following paragraphs, the focus will be put on the qualitative data collected from participants taking part in the blended condition, more specifically on the contents of the in-presence psychosocial group sessions. Analysis and results related to the effectiveness of the intervention, with a specific focus on the different conditions will be discussed by a colleague who participated in the broader project. For this reason, in the present chapter, only the methods and data related to the blended condition will be presented.

1. Participants

1.1 Sample data

A total number of 12 international students confirmed the participation in the in-presence intervention but only nine participants (F = 8; M = 1; age $M = 24.1$) attended the first meeting and three of them withdrew due to the incompatibility between lectures and

meetings, communicating their decision to the research team via email. From the second meeting on, six participants (F = 5; M = 1; age $M = 22,3$) took part in the group activity, which included international students enrolled both in master and bachelor degrees as well as PhD programmes. Except for one participant (Mark, M, 25, India) who was enrolled in a master degree in astrophysics and cosmology, other participants were all enrolled in psychology-related courses of study.

As regards interpersonal relationships between participants at the beginning of the intervention, the majority of participants did not know each other, except for two participants (Mia, F, 22, USA and Jenny, F, 21, Serbia) who were friends.

Personal data of participants, including gender, age, nationality, degree, course of study and year of attendance, are summarized in *Table 2*, where each participant has been assigned a made-up name in order to respect anonymity.

Table 2. *Personal data of participant in the blended condition*

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Nationality</i>	<i>Degree</i>	<i>Course of Study</i>	<i>Year of Attendance</i>	<i>Left After the First Meeting</i>
<i>Mark</i>	M	25	Indian	Master's	Astrophysics and Cosmology	3	
<i>Lisa</i>	F	22	Turkish	Master's	Clinical, social and intercultural psychology	4	
<i>Sarah</i>	F	20	Trinidad e Tobago	Bachelor	Psychological science	3	
<i>Mia</i>	F	24	Turkish	Master's	Clinical, social and intercultural psychology	2	
<i>Sage</i>	F	22	USA	Bachelor	Psychological science	4	
<i>Jenny</i>	F	21	Serbian	Bachelor	Psychological science	3	
<i>May</i>	F	27	Messican	Master's	Clinical, social and intercultural psychology	1	X
<i>Georgia</i>	F	24	Iranian	Bachelor	Psychological science	4	X
<i>Carol</i>	F	32	Belarusian	PhD	--	2	X

1.2 Inclusion criteria

In order to be included in the research, students had to be international students regularly enrolled in a bachelor degree, master's degree or a PhD programme at the University of Padua. International students, eligible to participate in the research, are those who are enrolled in an entire course of study lasting three or two years or a single cycle, coming from a foreign country and domiciled in Italy for purposes of study. For this reason, both erasmus students, attending one semester in the University of Padua, and students and foreign students enrolled in individual courses provided by the University of Padua have been excluded from the research. Being resident in the city or in the province of Padua was a preferential requirement, as participants had to be able to attend the in-presence meetings once a week. Other inclusion criteria included being of legal age (over 18) and having good English proficiency.

1.3 Recruitment

Participants were recruited through the use of different channels. Some participants were recruited through their participation in a cross-sectional survey to assess international students' level well-being and mental health that was carried out between July and December 2022. In this survey participants were asked to freely leave their email to be recontacted to propose them future group activities for international students. International students who provided their email at the end of the survey, were contacted by the research team and invited to participate in the blended psychosocial group intervention. Those who were interested in participating, but couldn't attend the in-presence group because of different personal or academic impediments, were proposed to take part to the online condition (online self-help materials), waiting for the second edition of the in-presence group that would have been carried out in the second academic semester.

Considering possible drops out at the beginning of the intervention, the research team considered that each condition had to include at least 15 participants. Other participants were recruited through the dissemination of an invitation via telematic communication systems (e.g. WhatsApp) and social media (Instagram, Facebook, etc.) specifically sharing the initiative on groups and pages involving international students enrolled in the University of Padua. Furthermore, the invitation was disseminated via e-mail to other international students at the University of Padua thanks to the collaboration of the global engagement office and the international student tutoring office.

2. Method

Participants assigned to the blended condition took part in a pilot psychosocial group intervention aimed at promoting international students' well-being and social connectedness through eight meetings delivered in presence weekly.

The intervention has been developed according to the *action research* theoretical framework (*see. Paragraph 2.3*) as the group meetings have been used also to collect qualitative data, successively subjected to a thematic analysis, to explore the experiences of international students enrolled in the University of Padua. In addition to in-presence sessions, participants also received online self-help materials developed by the research team following the structure of in-presence sessions and delivered via email weekly. The day before the meeting, participants received an email by the moderator, reminding them of the session and including a brief comment of the previous meeting as well as one chapter of the self-help material.

The structure of the group intervention and its meetings will be furtherly discussed in *Paragraph 2.1* while online self-help materials will be presented in *Paragraph 2.2*.

2.1 The in-presence group intervention

The pilot group intervention was delivered in-presence and consisted in eight weekly meetings moderated by a psychologist, and assisted by a trainee psychologist, enrolled in the master's degree in clinical psychology in the University of Padua. The research team included a registered psychotherapist who oversaw the entire intervention, meeting the moderator and the trainee psychologist after each session. The intervention has been designed by the research team based on the analysis of available literature related to international students' needs and characteristics as well as identifying interventions carried out by other authors for similar purposes.

The intervention has been developed considering well-being as a multicomponential construct, encompassing psychological and social factors, which have been addressed providing participants psychosocial resources through several group activities, fostering self-reflection, promoting social connectedness, and creating a social environment which constitutes itself an occasion to establish social relationships, share experiences and resources.

Each meeting, lasting 90 minutes, took place every Wednesday at the Psychological Assistance Center of the University of Padua (SCUP) which provided a room to carry out the meetings from the 9th of November 2022 to the 25th of January 2023, suspending meetings during winter holidays. The researchers tracked participants' attendance, which are reported in *Table 3*, showing that an average of four participants over six attended each meeting if excluding the first session.

Table 3. *Participants' attendance*

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Meeting 1</i>	<i>Meeting 2</i>	<i>Meeting 3</i>	<i>Meeting 4</i>	<i>Meeting 5</i>	<i>Meeting 6</i>	<i>Meeting 7</i>	<i>Meeting 8</i>
Mark	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Lisa	X	X		X	X	X	X	X
Sarah	X	X			X		X	X
Mia	X		X	X		X	X	X
Sage	X	X	X	X		X	X	
Jenny	X		X			X	X	

The intervention was structured to cover the topics/constructs identified in the development phase: socialization, well-being etc.; each session presented a given/defined structure that could have been flexibly modulated depending on participants' involvement and needs. Even if meetings were driven by a topic (*see Table 3*), participants were encouraged to express themselves freely. The setting of the intervention has been indeed developed in order to represent a safe space for participants, where cooperation, sharing and constructing shared meanings of their experiences were encouraged through a supportive and collaborative approach adopted by the conductor.

Each session was structured as follows: at the beginning of each meeting, except from the first session, participants were invited to briefly summarize the previous session both to involve participants who were absent the previous meeting and to facilitate the beginning of the current one. Participants who were absent in the previous group session were given the opportunity to express themselves about the topics discussed the previous week, allowing researchers to collect data from every participant as well as giving everyone the possibility to talk and reflect upon all the topics. The first meeting was introduced by the conductor, who specified some aspects related to the intervention without giving information which could interfere in the research, and emphasizing the confidentiality of the information shared during

the meetings as well as the fact that it would have been a safe place for participants. From the second session, after discussing the previous meeting, the conductor introduced the main topic of the current session through an activity aimed at promoting an individual reflection upon one topic, which participants could then share with the rest of the group, starting a discussion. Towards the end of each meeting, participants were asked to produce an artwork aimed to facilitate the transition from individual elaboration to a group perspective, accounting for shared meanings related to the experience of being an international student in the University of Padua. The artwork created according to the group perspective has been taken into account also during the analysis of data, as a source of information able to account for participants' perspectives and elaborations of their own experience as international students, elaborated in the group.

Each meeting was driven by a topic, developed in the course of two sessions and selected by the research team after reviewing available literature and identifying international students' needs and peculiarities. Evidence from literature has been considered in developing the intervention specifically addressed to international students, aimed at promoting their well-being and social connectedness. Topics addressed in each meeting and a brief description of each session are summarized in *Table 4*.

During in-presence sessions, qualitative data have been collected by audio-recording each meeting using a smartphone. Audio files have been transcribed verbatim and subjected to a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), aimed at identifying recurrent themes related to overall experiences of international students enrolled in the University of Padua. Thematic analysis as a qualitative method of data analysis will be further discussed in *Paragraph 3.1*.

Table 4. Topics addressed and description of meetings

Session	Focus	Description
Session 1	Creation of the group and facilitation of interactions between its members.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Informed consent form and clinical tests. 2. Participants were invited to engage in a short “icebreaker” game aimed at facilitating participants in introducing themselves to the group. 3. Participants were asked to think about a shared metaphor which could represent the group experience according to their expectations and put the metaphor into an artwork. 4. Each participant received three post-it on which he/she had to write (a) his/her expectations related to the group experience, (b) his/her fears related to the group experience and (c) one personal aspect he/she could give to the group and then share what he wrote with other members of the group. 5. Participants were invited to discuss the rules they consider necessary in order to be part of the group. 6. The last minutes were dedicated to answering the questions of the participants, talking about the times, dates and place of the meetings.
Session 2	Exploration of individual and collective meanings related to the experience of being an international student.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Summary of the previous session. 2. Participants were asked to think about the motivations which led them to pursue their academic career abroad and they were invited to think about the departure from their home country, focusing on how they got prepared to leave and what they brought to Italy with them. 3. Creation of an <i>artwork</i> representing the

		<p>“ideal luggage” of an international student, filling it both with concrete objects and other aspects they considered important in such an experience based on the wisdom, knowledge and experiences made so far as international students.</p>
Session 3	<p>Exploration of personal construction of well-being, also focusing on the experience of being an international student and taking into account individual and cultural differences.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Summary of the previous session 2. Participants were asked to think about their personal definition of well-being. After sharing and discussing their personal perspective, participants were asked to think about well-being contextualized to the experience of being an international student, identifying elements supporting and challenging their well-being studying abroad. 3. Creation of an <i>artwork</i> which could account for a shared definition of well-being, representing elements able to positively and negatively affect international students’ well-being while studying abroad.
Session 4	<p>Exploration of actions and strategies able to support well-being, with the aim to create and share supportive modalities and resources.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Summary of the previous session. 2. Each participant was asked to complete a weekly planner writing down the activities he/she does in an average week, sharing and discussing the activities they do weekly, reflecting upon their own weeks, identifying activities that support their well-being and those who do not. 3. Creation of an artwork representing an activity participants could do together in order to enhance their well-being, identifying a common way to reach well-being.
Session 5	<p>Exploring participants’ personal experiences with technology and social media, and the role it had before</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Summary of the previous session. 2. Participants were asked to think about their relationship with social media and

	<p>the departure as well as during their experience abroad.</p>	<p>technological tools and share his/her personal experience and discuss with others. Participants were asked to contextualize the topic to the experience of being an international student, thinking about the role social media and technological tools had before the departure as well as during their experience abroad.</p> <p>3. Creation of an artwork representing the “ideal social network” addressed to international students who want to enroll in the University of Padua.</p>
Session 6	<p>Personal resources as well as available resources in the city of Padua which can be useful to international students.</p>	<p>1. Summary of the previous meeting.</p> <p>2. Participants were asked to identify and share all the places that are important for them in the city of Padua, finding all the places on a map of the city.</p> <p>3. Creation of an artwork representing participants’ own map of the city of Padua, feeling free to add places/services/resources that could be useful to international students.</p>
Session 7	<p>Connection of aspects discussed in previous sessions.</p>	<p>1. Summary of the previous meeting.</p> <p>2. Researchers created a game by simulating a well-known Italian board game, where players move from one square to another by rolling a dice. Each square contained deliveries (e.g. identifying a need of international students) to which participants had to respond together, finding a shared vision with respect to the request. After completing all the squares, the game began. Moving from one box to another by rolling the dice, participants were offered different activities to facilitate the shared elaboration of the topic.</p> <p>3. The artwork consisted of completing the game itself, as the participants built their own board by completing the</p>

		squares.
Session 8	Conclusion of the intervention.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Completing the game started in the previous session. 2. Creation of the last artwork, finding a metaphor representing the just-ended experience as a group participating in the intervention as well as international students enrolled in the University of Padua. 3. Participants were asked to write down and share: (a) one take-home from the group experience, (b) one thing they gained from the group relationship and (c) three words to describe the experience of the group intervention. 4. Clinical tests.

2.2 The online self-help materials

Participants received as well online self-help materials delivered via email weekly, created by the research team following the structure of in-presence sessions.

In the present research, online self-help materials have been implemented as they are recognized to be a form of support compatible with face-to-face support services (Williams & Whitfield, 2001) which can favor students in several ways (Pakrosnis & Cepukiene, 2015). Cuijpers (1997) defined self-help as “a standardized treatment method with which a patient can help himself with-out major help from the therapist. In (self-help) it is necessary that treatment be described in sufficient detail, so that the patient can work it through independently” (Pakrosnis & Cepukiene, 2015, p. 438). Self-help are linked to a series of benefits, as they can be accessed from long distances, minimize the effect of stigmatization and respect one’s privacy, and they can be used at one’s time and pace, allowing the user to navigate materials, going back and using them as often as needed (Pakrosnis & Cepukiene, 2015). Despite self-help methods can differ from each other both for form and content,

several authors (e.g. Thorpe & Barsky, 2001; Grant, 2002) stressed the importance of self-help materials to promote self-reflection, which is recognized to be crucial in order to initiate a change. As reported in Pakrosnis and Cepukiene (2015), even differing in form (e.g. audio or video materials, books, self-reflection worksheets, etc.), self-help tools stimulate users in reflecting on their experiences, problematic situations and other aspects of life, which are selected and shaped according for the purpose of the intervention as well as the theoretical framework adopted in developing the self-help.

Self-help materials adopted in the current research consist of eight chapters, in which participants were offered activities to do both alone and with friends aimed at promoting reflection upon topics related to the experience of being an international student, well-being, socialization, available resources and technological devices. Each chapter has been created in order to match the corresponding in-presence session as regards the topic, however in-person meetings and online self-help materials were not overlapping, offering different activities.

Each chapter included different activities, short games and questions, aimed at stimulating users' self-reflection on several topics, which are briefly described in *Table 4*. Each chapter included three pages always structured in a similar way: at the beginning of each chapter, one page always the same (*How to use this chapter, see. Appendix 1, Fig. 1*) was dedicated to give participants some information about the possible use of the online *self-help* materials; another recurrent page (*Insight, see. Appendix 1, Fig. 2*) provided useful information and reflection upon the topic covered by the chapter, presenting insight/reflections in every chapter depending on the specific topic; and in the last page (*Further reflection, see. Appendix 1, Fig. 3*) was always reported a Qr code linked to an online video, selected by the research team, meant to foster further reflections on the topic, with a relevant quote and its title to introduce the topic. The researchers took care of each chapter with regard to content, texts, choice of activities, layout and illustrations. .

Table 5. Self-help materials: a brief description of each chapter

Chapter	Description
1. "Nice to meet you"	Self-reflection about users' way of presenting themselves to others.
2. "Me, you, us"	S Self-reflection about users' relationships and networks of social resources.
3. "Exploring the idea of well-being"	S Self-reflection about users' personal meanings of well-being. This chapter also proposes activities to be carried out with friends.
4. "Creating my idea of well-being"	Self-reflection about users' sensations and activities related to their well-being. This chapter also proposes activities to be carried out with friends.
5. "Caught in the net or surfing?"	Self-reflection about users' relationship with technology and social media, exploring both positive and negative aspects of digital tools as well as how they affect one's relationships.
6. "Construing my network of resources"	Self-reflection about available resources (e.g. people, places, services, etc.) users can count on and how those are connected between each other. This chapter also proposes activities to be carried out with friends.
7. "Can we start to see a way?"	Self-reflection about connection between different topics addressed in previous chapters.
8. "Moving forward one step at a time"	Self-reflection about users' experience using the self-help, guiding them in summarizing what they did in previous chapters.

2.3 Action research

The whole research project, and in particular the portion exposed in this thesis, have been developed within the theoretical framework of action research as the aim of the research team was to collect qualitative data related to experiences of international students enrolled in the University of Padua, at the same time providing and evaluating an intervention addressing their well-being.

The origin of action research is largely attributed to Kurt Lewin, who coined the label of *action research* in 1944, recognizing in such an approach a way to solve practical problems affecting social groups as well as discover general laws of group life (Peter &

Robinson, 1984). According to Lewin (1948) “we should consider action, research and training as a triangle that should be kept together” (p. 211), highlighting the importance of integrating interventions in the research process and *vice versa* as, from his point of view “research that produces nothing but books will not suffice” (Lewin, 1946, p. 35). In Lewin’s approach, the importance of action research as a cyclical process of fact finding, planning, strategic action and evaluation is stressed (Masters, 1995) as action research requires a collaborative relationship between the researcher and participants in carrying out a research as well as in changing people and groups conditions (Peter & Robinson, 1984).

Even if there is general agreement in considering Lewin the father of action research, other authors and researchers developed their own conceptions and models of such approach (Peter and Robinson, 1984).

Attempting to account for the history of action research, Masters (1995) reported three definitions of action research which share four themes: empowerment of participants, collaboration through participation, acquisition of knowledge and social change. According to McCutcheon and Jung (1990) it represents a "systemic inquiry that is collective, collaborative, self-reflective, critical and undertaken by participants in the inquiry" (Masters, 1995, 2.). Kemmis and McTaggart (1990) defined action research as "a form of collective self-reflective inquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices, as well as their understanding of these practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out" (Masters, 1995, p. 2). While Rapoport (1970) stated that "action research aims to contribute both to the practical concerns of people in an immediate problematic situation and to the goals of social science by joint collaboration within a mutually acceptable ethical framework" (Masters, 1995, p. 2)

According to Peter and Robinson (1984) the action research, recognized as a form of social research, represents a way to overcome a problem affecting social science which they refer to as “the relation and the relevance of theory to practice” (Peter & Robinson, 1984, p. 114) and authors who developed different approaches to action research, compared to Lewin, have often highlighted the importance of considering participants’ values, beliefs and intentions as well as recognizing that social problems faced by individuals arise from and are embedded in a social context. As a consequence, human beings are considered active in constructing social reality which they can also change through their actions. Different approaches included by Peter and Robinson (1984) consider action research as a problem-focused approach, aimed at improving some existing social practices to better individual lives, where the research consists of a cyclical process characterized by the cooperation between participants.

The intervention discussed in this thesis has been developed according to the action research perspective, as its purpose was to actively involve international students in the research process aimed to explore the experiences of foreign students enrolled in the University of Padua, at the same time creating a setting of intervention where participants had the possibility to cooperate with other international students, identifying challenges and needs related to their experience as well as sharing stories and resources. The intervention was developed in order to facilitate the acquisition of knowledge and psychosocial resources through interpersonal exchange, making the group setting a relational resource itself where participants could create social connections between each other. Participants were given the opportunity to express themselves and their needs in a safe and supportive space, as well as suggest possible changes, which could be implemented in order to better the experience of international students enrolled in the University of Padua.

3. Analysis

In-presence meetings have been audio-recorded using a smartphone in order to collect qualitative data from participants' stories and discussions. Audio files have been transcribed verbatim by the research team and then subjected to a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), aimed at identifying recurrent themes accounting for participants' experiences as international students enrolled in the University of Padua.

Thematic analysis is a flexible method to analyze qualitative data, aiming to identify and report recurrent patterns of themes and meanings within data, where a theme has to capture "something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 10). The process of analysis consists of six phases, starting with familiarizing yourself with data, then generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and, at the end, producing the report. The process composed of these phases, leading to the production of the final report, is not linear as it requires to return on data often, discussing and reviewing the analysis.

In the research presented in this thesis, thematic analysis has been adopted with the aim to explore experiences of international students enrolled in the University of Padua based on stories and discussions of six international students involved in a pilot psychosocial group intervention. During the process of analysis, artworks produced by the group at the end of each meeting have been considered as accounting for participants' shared perspective related to the experience of being an international student.

Chapter 3: Results

From the thematic analysis carried out on the transcription of in-presence sessions' audio recordings, the research team identified four overarching themes: being an international student, challenges of being an international student, coping with difficulties and international students' well-being. Each overarching theme contains different themes, for a total of 13, and their sub-themes, for a total of 42, those are shown in *Table 6*.

In next paragraphs overarching themes, themes and sub-themes will be presented, also reporting participants' verbatim quotations, that will be followed by a code to identify the participant respecting their anonymity. The code will be composed of a made-up name, gender will be reported using the letter M when the participant is a male and the letter F when female, also the age and nationality of participants will be indicated.

In the last paragraph a brief description of participants' interactions during each meeting will be provided and paired with the artwork produced by participants in the same session, with the aim to enrich qualitative data collected through thematic analysis and attempting to make some considerations related to the quality of relationships among participants. The importance of such observations stems from the fact that the intervention, among other objectives, has been designed to constitute itself a relational source for participants, becoming a place capable of fostering social connections between international students.

Table 6. Overarching themes, themes and sub-themes.

Being an international student	Choosing to move abroad	Personal motivations Cultural motivations
	Preparing for the experience	Being helped by other people Looking for information Broadening one's horizon
	Anticipated outcomes of the experience	Becoming independent far from home Creating memories Becoming a citizen of the world
Challenges of being an international student	Linguistic barriers	Employees in public offices don't speak English Dealing with racism Dealing with a loss of independence Difficulties in improving Italian Lack of English resources in the University environment
	Italian bureaucracy	Practical disruptions Emotional fatigue
	Cultural differences	Challenging one's food habits Dealing with different weather A different University experience
	Facing Loneliness	Missing loved ones in the home country Creating relationships in the host country, not an easy job Resources to overcome loneliness
	The problem of housing	Finding an accommodation Living with other people for the first time
Coping with difficulties	Useful strategies for international students to overcome difficulties	Learn and practice Italian (the local language) Be prepared when dealing with bureaucracy Find your best solutions for health-care Be wise and patient in finding an accommodation Be open to new people and make friends Challenge your food habits, share and explore! Ask for support to friends in the host country
	Requests for the country and university	Make bureaucracy accessible for international students Support international students with housing Foster socialization with other students
International students' well-being	Personal meanings	Being able to trust yourself Finding your balance
	Aspects supporting well-being	Dedicating time to yourself Having a routine/plan and being organized Having social support to rely on and being involved in social activities Handling one's future /Opportunities
	Aspects affecting well-being	Dealing with obligations Lacking social support Dealing with relationship drama

3.1 Being an international student

This overarching theme comprises a set of themes reporting the narrative of participants related to the experience of being an international student. Participants, during the group sessions, shared and discussed personal stories and meanings related to this specific experience covering different areas and topics which have been grouped under the following themes: choosing to move abroad, preparing for the experience and anticipated outcomes of the experience.

3.1.1 Choosing to move abroad

This theme tells of the motivations leading participants to pursue their academic career abroad and it consists of two sub-themes: personal motivations and cultural motivations.

Among personal motivations pushing international students abroad to pursue their academic education, participants reported to have chosen to study abroad as a way to support personal growth and broaden their horizons as well as challenge themselves, seeing if they could handle such an experience:

“But [choosing to study abroad] it's just to experience something, trying to meet new people and I think it's not just about doing the university because we have universities back home, It's more just for personal growth” (Sarah, F, 20, Trinidad e Tobago).

it started with, I guess, just studying, but then also see if I can do it because a lot of people can't live abroad as well, just maybe they don't like it, they can't do it. So it was a way to see if I can handle it? (Lisa, F, 22, Turchia).

Besides personal motivations, leading international students to enroll in universities far from their home country, also cultural motivations have a role in influencing their decision.

Becoming an international student can indeed represent a way to escape bad political situations in one's country as well as a common experience shared by many friends and family members:

I'm from Turkey, so politically, it's not the best place to be. It wasn't this bad, maybe, but it was going bad. Maybe, I mean I studied in a French high school in Turkey so a lot of people go abroad to do their uni and stuff. But I thought I would be staying in Turkey. Then, when I was in 11th grade, I decided to go look for universities abroad just because it was going bad economically and politically. So it's easier to go abroad as a university student and see if I can do it and if something happens maybe I could stay abroad (Lisa, F, 22, Turchia)

But I said it's something that my sister did... in Spain, so it's like It's just usual at some point you study abroad, just for the experience. (Sarah,F, 20, Trinidad and Tobago)

Studying abroad can also represent a way to pursue better education and opportunities, and a cultural achievement, positively celebrated in one's country from a social point of view:

[...] Actually, in my country it is like an achievement if you go abroad. Now it's not like that. But when I was at school, it was like that. So I used to think about ...whatever the career I chose It is most definitely I'll be going abroad, regardless of the career I would choose. Choosing Italy was also because the course, the career was here, in India we don't have a masters course for that so, it was the reason. [...] it is most likely that we will go back in some time in life. For like for the notion of an achievement but also for better education. (Mark, M, 25, India)

3.1.2 Preparing for the experience

The second theme focuses on the experiences of participants related to the period preceding the departure for such an experience, narrating specifically the process of leaving in terms of preparation, information seeking and support received by others. Two sub-themes have been identified: being helped by other people and looking for information.

While preparing to leave their countries, international students reported the importance of being helped by other people, especially family members, underlining the importance of having such a support network in this process:

[...] So, for packaging and stuff my mum was there and she made a WhatsApp group with my all cousins who had been abroad. She was just texting what else should be brought and everything. So, my cousins helped her [...] So I just took the bags with me from the airport...(Mark, M, 25, India)

I would be a mess without [support/help]. [...] My sister taught me about going to those because she had to deal with those. You know? Someone had to teach me those things. So, I don't know how people don't have that kind of support system (Sarah, F, 20, Trinidad e Tobago)

. Furthermore, they underlined that the process of looking for information consisted both in connecting with other people who studied abroad and looking online, trying to access

information related to bureaucracy and housing but also general information and curiosity about the Italian culture, lifestyle of students enrolled in the University of Padua and more, looking for youtube videos of people living in Italy as well as consulting the university websites.:

I Had a girl, from my high school, who was one year older than me, so she was studying here Because I could asked her questions, which was good [...] (Lisa, F, 22, Turchia)

So, for Italy, I knew two or three people who vlog on daily basis so I just go and see what they do and how they live here. And it was very helpful to know how [...] I found some habits, something about Italian people, about food. (Mark, M, 25, India)

Mh...I definitely watched youtube videos and stuff like that, not for Padova because there is not much in English but I used to watch lots of videos of people who moved to Italy, live in Italy and stuff like that, both Turkish people and people who just speak in English in their videos. [...] so I really did watch a lot of stuff for like general informations about cultural aspects and I use social media for different things. Yeah, I watched the University Instagram page, so I would see the students, what they look like, what they do and I got very curious about the crown they wear when they graduate. (Lisa, F, 22, Turkey)

3.1.3 Anticipated outcomes of the experience

The third theme tells about international students' anticipated outcomes of the experience of studying abroad, based on participants' narrative related to their expectations when thinking of this experience and how studying abroad has affected their lives so far, four sub-themes have been identified: broadening one's horizon, becoming independent far from home, creating memories and becoming a citizen of the world.

According to participants, the experience of studying abroad allows them to experience new things and get in contact with many people and possibilities that can broaden one's horizon, leading international students to change their perspective and dreams:

[...]So, you change maybe not like exactly your values, but like your dreams. Like maybe you found out a new passion that's because somebody was like "okay let's go, like, having guitar session" and you realize that you really want to learn how to play guitar, something that you never have considered before. So that happens on like so many levels just like over a coffee or a living situation. Like I live in a residence. Like there's constantly new people from all around the world that changes you a lot. (Jenny, F, 21, Serbia)

Studying abroad is recognized to be an enriching experience, which allows students to meet people from all over the world, gain cultural knowledge, become more open minded as well as experiencing openness and absence of judgment:

Also I think meeting people from different cultures, like a lot of mental pictures that you have in your head...like they change as well...like even if you don't have any stereotype in your head, you are really open minded, like you are the most intellectual person, when you start meeting with people and learning new different points of view, then you are like "oh, actually I didn't know this existed...so you change. And sometimes when I talk to my friends from home, they realize as well like "oh, you wouldn't have said this few month ago" so I think it changes you a lot...until I came here I didn't have any friends from another country, because I didn't have the environment for that so I never got to experience it and now I get to know a lot of other cultures so that's different. (Lisa, F, 22, Turkey)

[...] So I didn't expect that openness about the thoughts, or even in the countries. Because I live in a place where we are four people, there are two boys and two girls. Everyone is from a different country. So we have, almost every day, dinner together and we talk about a lot of stuff. So I have never sensed judgment or, even which is deeply rooted inside me because of the culture [...] (Mark, M, 25, India)

On the other hand, personal changes deriving from this experience could result in the difficulty of being recognized by families and friends back in one's country of origin, fearing that once back, these personal changes could generate misunderstandings and potential difficulties:

Also I feel like you change a lot when you start doing everything for yourself and you do it alone in a foreign country and I don't know they are gonna see that change or something and they are gonna be weird...you know if you live alone and then you go back to live with your parents for two weeks and then yeah, I don't know, I'm looking forward to it but at the same time I'm a little bit scared about what is gonna be like (Sarah, F, 20, Trinidad e Tobago).

[...]sometimes you can be in a very big conflict with something that you're used to and something that you really need. Like now that I'm at home, you meet people from all the places and then you get to know their perspective and then you realize that sometimes when you do things and they are ok for you and for your current surroundings, but you have mentality from where you come from and sometimes when you do things that clash with that mentality, there is like a very big sense of guilt. (Jenny, F, 21, Serbia)

Another anticipated outcome of the experience consists in becoming independent thanks to the experience of being far from home. According to participants, studying abroad makes international students grow faster than it would have happened by staying in the

country of origin. Being alone far from home is recognized to be an humbling experience as well as an opportunity to learn, gain strength and discover personal handiness in solving practical problems:

It's good, it's good because I've discovered it very handy because something's fixing, I'm going to fix it, I'm going to figure out, I'll look it up on YouTube and I'll figure out myself. So, you know, so I like knowing that about myself. [...] I think that it makes you stronger, I mean...after all this what can happen to me? (Sara, F, 20, Trinidad e Tobago)

An important outcome is that studying abroad makes international students who lived such an experience a resource for other people who want to pursue their education abroad, in fact they could play a role in supporting them preparing or finding useful information, as well as by sharing their personal experiences and their gained wisdom.

[...] bureaucratic stuff is that bad. But then, now I know by hearth that I help other people like “you have to do this and that” so I don't have to go through this experience again [...] (Lisa, F, 22, Turkey)

Yeah! A friend of mine actually did it, she had a youtube channel when we were here for our bachelor, the first year, and she is turkish so I recorded the video, as she was the one, it was her channel...and it was fun, it was nice to talk about, you know, all the things and stuff...And lots of people ask her lots of questions and it was weird because they ask her about bureaucratic stuff. (Lisa, F, 22, Turkey)

The experience of studying abroad is also recognized as a memorable experience, during which international students have the opportunity to create memories that they will want to remember once they have finished their studies abroad:

And what about memories? That's the biggest prize I guess [...] You travel and meet people, and when you get older you'd be like “oh I actually lived in italy” and stuff like that and maybe I'd still live here, who knows...(Lisa, F, 22, Turkey)

Participants also pointed out that studying abroad can lead to no longer feeling to belong to one place, as in Italy they have their own house and they are cultivating themselves and other relationships:

I don't know if I feel like I belong to Italy, obviously it's still a short time, but I've lived on my own for the first time here, so that's the bit... because whenever I go back to Turkey, I say, I when I talk to my mom, I'm like, “I'm gonna go home in a month”, for example, because my home is also here because my house is here, it's my own house. So it's a bit tricky. (Lisa, F, 22, Turkey)

Belonging to two places has several consequences on international students, asking themselves where their home actually is and making them feel distant from their home country but also broadening their opportunities to choose where they would live in the future, making them citizens of the world:

When my mom talks to me about things that are going on at home and I'm like, yeah I know everything she is telling me but I feel like distant from it...I know it's home but I don't know, they don't feel like home, you know...(Sarah, F, 20, Trinidad e Tobago)

[...] For example right now, I think that this one is really funny...whenever there is a...I don't know when they were playing the European league of football or the Eurovision and Italy won both of them, I got happy as I was Italian! Like "we win!"...We?...Well, chill, Italy is not your country (laugh) but that made me really happy, and everytime I'm rooting for something and Turkey is not there, I'll be rooting for Italy, like there is no other option for me but that's weird...So I think that after a while...Right now what I'm feeling is like "where are you from?" is like a bit weird...you are from Turkey well, I don't know, it's a bit different, is a mixture of things...(Lisa, F, 22, Turkey)

3.2 Challenges of being an international student

This overarching theme comprises a series of themes reporting narratives related to challenges and difficulties faced by participants during their experience abroad, with regards to those related to the Italian context. Participants reported to have faced several challenges living abroad, which have been grouped in the following five themes: linguistic barriers, Italian bureaucracy, cultural differences, facing loneliness and the problem of housing.

3.2.1 Linguistic barriers

The first theme focuses on linguistic barriers, as they represent one of the challenges underlined by participants while sharing their experiences as international students enrolled in the University of Padua, and it includes six sub-themes: employees in public offices don't speak English, dealing with racism, dealing with loss of independence, difficulties in improving Italian and lack of English resources in the University environment.

Narrative of participants, underlined the fact that employees in Italian public offices don't speak English, affecting their possibility to access useful services and information. Particularly relevant aspects concern difficulties in accessing the Italian health care system due to the lack of English-speaking doctors as well as difficulties in accessing useful bureaucratic information:

For me [a challenge] would be keeping yourself healthy, because [...]If you are ill is very difficult telling your doctor what you feel, because they don't speak English. (Mark, M, 25, India)

I had really different experiences with language here because when I first came here I didn't speak Italian. So first it was a struggle for, like, permesso application ...to the post office with the old lady and trying to tell them something. It was a bit hard [...] (Lisa, F, 22, Turkey)

Participants also pointed out that they had to deal with episodes of racism linked to the existing linguistic barriers, reporting to have been shouted at for not knowing Italian and to have been rejected by house owners, who refuse to rent apartments to international students who do not know the local language:

My biggest problem was with the company, the electricity company, Enel, and I had to, like, open my own contract, back to my own contract and stuff like that. But whenever I was on the phone with them I would start saying in Italian, I would say "Oh, my Italian is not that good, do you speak English?" But there isn't anyone speaking, and it happened like six times. They start shouting "Oh you live in Italy? How can you not speak Italian?" [...] So I'm like trying my best, but I guess but I get shouted a lot in three years for not speaking Italian really well and I tried. (Lisa, F, 22, Turkey)

Yeah, I've seen that a lot, because I use facebook a lot, like marketplace to find my apartment because agency have always that aspect they say like "no international students"...and it's not like "no erasmus" like "no people who come here only for 6 months" it's like "you need to speak italian, to know italian" and that's a stupid thing. (Mia, F, 22, USA)

They almost didn't give me my house when I was trying to rent it...like they didn't do it explicitly, they were like "oh, we talked to the owner and they don't want students as renters" and I knew that the previous renters where students but they were italian, they were a couple so I was like "I know they were students, you told me...and I am a student and my boyfriend is a student so why not?" [...] (Lisa, F, 22, Turkey)

Learning Italian is recognized as a way to pay respect to citizens of the host country, attempting to take a step towards the local community and reduce the gap between local people and international students:

You know, people are nicer to you if you, at least, attempt to speak in Italian. If you just start with English all time, then it's going to be like you don't even try to speak my language. You know, I think it's a form of respect, you know, trying to communicate in that language. (Sarah, F, 20, Trinidad e Tobago)

[...] oh they don't speak English, but they don't have to. You're coming to this environment and you should respect to learn. You should be the one who makes some efforts to learn some stuff". So now I am trying to learn [...] (Sage, F, 24, Turkey)

Furthermore, participants recognized linguistic barriers as something leading to a loss of independence, pushing them to rely on Italian friends to handle situations that require a good knowledge of Italian, such as bureaucratic and housing issues, making them feel humiliated:

[...] I would always have to ask to my italian friends which is very humiliating to ask them a favor all of the times all the)times and then, yeah, I'm going to take you for dinner. But like I'm gonna do this, I'm gonna do that. But it's just humiliating [...] (Lisa, F, 22, Turkey)

[...] I'm like "if you don't want to teach me italian, you have to speak for me". But then I'm becoming less independent because then I'm willing to help. [...] It's a strange feeling to ask for help. (Sarah, F, 20, Trinidad e Tobago)

According to participants' narratives, linguistic barriers can lead to a loss of independence also limiting their opportunities to find a job if needed:

And also it makes it difficult to find a job for example. Okay I don't have to worry, I don't need job, but I can't because there is nothing I can do. Almost without speaking English. So that a little bit struggle. (Lisa, F, 22, Turkey)

Participants also reported difficulties in improving their Italian due to several factors, including difficulties in engaging with Italian peers, both because they do not always speak English and because they tend to talk to each other and when engaging with Italian peers is possible, improving one's knowledge still difficult, as Italian students often prefer to speak in English to improve their proficiency:

They're (italian students) on the steps, but they talk to themselves...(Lisa, F, 22, Turkey)

[...] And then I moved into my apartment, i have three italian roomates two of them speak english well, so they only speak to me in English because they want to practice their English. And one of

them, his English when I met him it was just *meh*. Now we can fully have a conversation with me in English because he refuses to speak to me in Italian. [...] (Sarah, F, 20, Trinidad e Tobago)

Furthermore, participants avoid speaking Italian in certain situations due to fear of making mistakes, limiting their own learning opportunities:

[...] I wouldn't start with Italian because that's scary. You don't wanna make a mistake in something like contracts. So, it's a bit hard. [...] I guess like the problem is even if you feel confident enough, people really do start speaking Italian really fast. So even if you think you know you don't actually know Italian at that point. So I only like speak with the people that know that I am not Italian and stuff and with my friends I try. And that's all I did. And like I wouldn't engage in a conversation with a stranger on the street, because yeah... (Lisa, F, 22, Turkey)

Participants also stressed the lack of English resources in the University setting, pointing out that the majority of information is provided in Italian, underlining that both communications via e-mail and university websites do not include an English version:

We got emails every week for graduation like "do this and this", and they were like "English version below", I read the Italian version, then the English one and it was literally copy and paste from last year, so the dates are referring to December...so they were like "this thing has to be submitted in whatever November" and I was like...wha...what? (Mia, F, 22, USA)

I still find interesting that most of the pages on the university website are not translated in English, you find something in Italian and then you click on the English button and it takes you to the homepage because it doesn't exist...(Lisa, F, 22, Turkey)

3.2.2 Italian bureaucracy

This theme tells about participants' experiences with the Italian bureaucracy, recognized as a challenging factor in the experience of international students enrolled in the University of Padua, able to impact on their lives from various points of view. According to participants' narratives, two sub-themes have been identified: *practical disruptions* and *emotional fatigue*.

According to participants' narrative, practical disruptions of the Italian bureaucracy are in part linked to the organization of public offices involved in international student mobility, lacking an adequate number of employees compared to the number of international

students, and providing an ineffective service in terms of booking procedure and managing of opening hours, making international student wait a lot of time when using these services:

Yeah, my friends we joke... , you know, they've got this thing that you have to spend half of your time waiting in line, like for everything you need to wait in a line for like an hour, at least, you know. So, that's a joke "How long did you spend in the line? Who spend the most time in line?" [...] (Sarah, F, 20, Trinidad e Tobago)

I'll bring some patience, because everything is because everything is so slow in here [...] because every time you have to, like, think about what if I did something wrong [...] Because everything depended on those documents and it's so long. So, you are getting anxious with your rhythm. (Sage, F, 24, Turkey)

Another practical disruption regards the residence permit, which must be renewed and paid every year and whose documentation requires very long times, limiting international students' possibility to travel:

I think having at least three months where you know that you can't travel in other countries because you are waiting for your permesso...that's...everyone I know it's like "okey I can travel then, but this month I have to stay in Italy" (Sarah, F, 20, Trinidad e Tobago)

Another important aspect underlined by participants is related to the difficulty in finding useful information to ease the bureaucratic process, which is often confusing:

Yes! No one try to make this things easier and this year it's even worse...last year when my permesso came, I could just go and get it, even though I had to wait in line, but this year I received an SMS, and even though my card is ready they asked me to go on January 26th and...why? My card is there, I could just go and get it, why do I have to wait? (Sage, F, 24, Turkey)

Dealing with bureaucratic issues can also lead to emotional fatigue, as it represents a stressful process, capable to affect the possibility to enjoy the experience abroad:

I don't know, [I would like to bring with me] just a person who's there to do all that bureaucratic stuff and of being able to actually enjoy the experience. Because, I know, that...when I first moved to Italy and then I moved to Padova, so much time is being consumed by hunting down a doctor, to have a residency and know everything with scholarships and all stuff like that. And that kind of limitate the way of enjoying everything. (Mia, F, 22, USA)

3.2.3 Cultural differences

The third theme collects narratives and experiences related to cultural differences participants encountered when they moved to Italy as international students, focusing on

differences between Italy and their home countries they recognized as challenging, three sub-themes have been identified: challenging one's food habits, dealing with different weather and a different University experience.

Missing the food from home represents a common experience among participants, who reported that dealing with different habits can be very challenging while studying abroad. According to participants' narrative, food becomes an important source of connection with one's origins when they are far from home, making them miss food from home and pushing them to seek the same flavors also in the host country, which can be hard to find:

Italian food is great, but I'm from somewhere where we have a lot of different types of foods, here I eat one type of food all the time. It's weird. You know. Like the only time I get seasoning close to home is when I go to, like, in the Indian restaurant and I can't, like, can I buy seasoning from you? It's a restaurant. So, I guess It takes you home sometimes. (Sarah, F, 20, Trinidad e Tobago)

[...] You will see that nothing taste the same. For example, even if I cook some traditional food when the season it is not the same, it can be something similar, I can find it here, but it just doesn't taste the same. [...] (Lisa, F, 22, Turkey)

Participants also underlined another aspect contributing to the difficulty of dealing with different food habits, consisting in the lack of variety offered by Italy if compared to other countries, leading them to eat often the same things:

[...] I'm used to different types of food, you'll have Italian food, Kebab, and that's it, you know, there's not a lot of variety [...] (Sarah, F, 20, Trinidad e Tobago)

Moving to a country with a different climate compared to the country of origin can be a challenge for international students who are not always prepared. In particular, participants highlighted difficulties associated with seasonal changes in Italy and very low temperatures in winter for which they had not prepared adequately:

We have two seasons, but they're not really seasons because it's rain and sun [...] it's just some days we have more rain, some days we have more sun, but it's not really season. The temperatures are very consistent, it's always between 25 and 30. So here the weather changes all the time it's a lot to get used to... [...] (Sarah, F, 20, Trinidad e Tobago)

[...] last year I made a huge mistake, like, I thought that winter is.. it Shouldn't be that cold in here. So, like, my luggage was full of summer clothes, I only had like 5 stuff with long sleeves. Once I

arrived it was fine, but one year, one month after, like, I was “How am I going to survive in here?” Like what did I bring? Nothing [...] (Sage, F, 24, Turkey)

Those who lived their first winter ever or were used to higher temperatures reported to have gotten sick often and to have particularly suffered during winter:

[...] Last year I was like crying because it's too cold. I don't want to go up, it's too dark, it's too rainy. Like what I'm gonna do? like I have to stay at home, which I don't like [...] (Sage, F, 24, Turkey)

That reminds me the first day that it got dark before, I went home and I cried. I've never experienced that, it was awful and... It was dark early, it looked like midnight at four p.m. I was disoriented and my roommates told me about seasonal depression and that's how I get to know seasonal depression, it's weird (Sarah, F, 20, Trinidad e Tobago)

On the other hand, facing a different climate has also allowed participants to live and enjoy new experiences such as seeing a clear blue sky, the fog or snow for the first time:

But it's also good. Because one day I was out with my roommates and I saw fog for the first time and apparently I looked like a little kid because I took a video and it was so funny for them [...] (Sarah, F, 20, Trinidad e Tobago)

[...] I'm from Mumbai and it is like much polluted. So I have never seen the sky like this clear. And my flat is on the third floor, so I can see sunrise and sunset every day. So that wasn't possible even in my flat at home [...] (Mark, M, 25, India)

Another important cultural difference concerns the University, as participants reported to be used to a different university experience. In particular, participants underlined that in the majority of countries, universities are concentrated in a single large campus that welcomes all students and activities, while in Padua the university has many distinct locations scattered throughout the city:

[...] while in Turkey you kind of have to be social in the university setting, also because of the campus, here is all over the city, there is no campus, you have different universities settings around the city (Lisa, F, 22, Turkey)

Also, participants recognized the lack of extracurricular activities in English particularly stressing the lack of university clubs which, together with differences related to the university setting, result in less opportunities to socialize with other students:

There are a lot of international students, especially now, but there is not a lot of activities that you can do in English because when I first came here, it was a little bit weird because in Turkey

Universities they have clubs that you would be in and there are a lot of them...everyone would do something and here there is nothing except from the regular things like theater and sport teams and the basics ones but not specific ones, even in Italian, that's a bit of shame. I'd love to join some clubs, create networks and meet people but...[...] we have them in high school as well, so you grow up with that kind of thing and you have a period every week that you would be given to extracurricular activities so I was like "oh in Europe it would be even more interesting because you know, in Europe they have lots of interesting things..." and if you don't do anything, no one forces to do anything like social here [...] (Lisa, F, 22, Turkey)

I also think that could help international students to adapt...in the future. 'Cause they could also meet other people...obviously it's easier to meet people in bars...for sure...but if you are not a person who is sociable in a bar setting [...] But in a club you have to talk to people, you have to do some things together and you are already in the same club, with the same interests, so that helps. (Lisa, F, 22, Turkey)

3.2.4 Facing loneliness

This theme tells about challenges reported by participants in facing loneliness while studying abroad, accounting for international students' experience of cultivating relationships in different countries at the same time and its implications. According to participants' narratives, three sub-themes have been identified: missing loved ones in the home country, creating relationships in the host country: not an easy job and resources to overcome loneliness.

Missing loved ones in the home country represents a common experience shared by all participants, who underlined the importance of maintaining relationships with people who have known them for a long time such as friends from home and family members, allowing them to feel grounded, connected to their origins and remember who they are, especially when they go through hard times in the host country:

I think that it helps to make you feel connected to home and...I think it's grounding...it helps you to remember who you are because sometimes, especially when you...are at the Italian questura, or you have done something wrong and you are like "oh what am I doing..." and then just talking with people who know you...it reminds you who you are and get you the motivation to keep going...so just keeping you grounded and connected to home [...] So sometimes they just call like "I need to tell you this thing because you just know me, and you'll understand"...And as much as I love friends that I made here, we just met few months ago and it's not the same, you know... (Sarah, F, 20, Trinidad e Tobago)

I will always say to my friends “if you were there my life would be like 100 percent perfect” because I feel like there is some sense of security that comes from that, like emotional side that when you have, like, people that you have for your all life. That always helps when you are in a new space. So I think that I would bring my friends as well. [...] (Jenny, F, 21 , Serbia)

To this extent, participants underlined the important role of social media as a great source of connection between them and loved ones:

I use social media a lot...first of all they are the main source of communication with my friends, because we don't use like whatsapp or messages but we communicate through instagram [...] (Jenny, F, 21 , Serbia)

According to participants' narratives, technological devices allow them to feel emotionally connected with people back home and to involve them in their experience abroad, especially making parents feel part of their lives.

Participants reported difficulties in connecting with friends from the home country, especially when they all study in different countries with different time zones, as well as difficulties in understanding parents' perspective while being far from home:

Yeah...but just basic things...because it's like..sometimes it's not that important for you but like keeping updated to your family, that matters because there are some days that I don't inform my family and they are curious, of course and they are like “oh...how are you? It's been a long time...update us please” and it's hard to understand, from their point of view because you are there, they are sending you away and you are doing some stuff in here, but they are always thinking about you, while you may not be thinking about them that often, of course you are thinking about them but it's not on the same level so maybe we can put like “not be ignorant” or like “be more updat...” I don't know how to say... (Sage, F, 24, Turkey)

Participants underlined that building relationships abroad can be hard, however having friends in the host country represents a great resource to overcome loneliness and receive emotional support, allowing international students to share common experiences with other people, feeling comforted:

[...] what I take away is that I'm doing okay which I wasn't sure because I thought that all the issues that I was having was just me not dealing with moving abroad and I realized that is just part of the experience and not that you are not doing things correctly, so in that is insightful and then is comforting to be around international students who understand what you are going through and who are not judging you for it [...] (Sarah, F, 20, Trinidad e Tobago)

[...]by talking to other people I find that everyone is going through most of the same things...and the words I wrote are comfort because I felt very comfortable to talk about it, everything I mean and connected and the other thing is relieved. (Mark, M, 25, India)

I mean, is nice to not expect a lot from other people, like depend on them, but I find always nice to share, because other people can always go through the same struggles and you feel alone even though you are not. (Lisa, F, 22, Turkey)

Participants underlined that even if friends in the host country are not always able to help them solving practical problems, spending time with them makes international students feel good, distracting them from thoughts and problems:

I mean, sometimes they are able to help me with the problem but when It can't be solved, It just gave me the chance not to think about it. If I am having a bureaucracy problem [...talking] at 8 in the night is not gonna help, so make me forget about it, can help. (Sarah, F, 20, Trinidad e Tobago)

Other than that, friends in the host country and in particular Italian friends, are also recognized as a source of practical support for international students, helping them to deal with several challenges.

If I didn't have any italian friend, I wouldn't even have an house. (Lisa, F, 22, Turkey)

3.2.5 The problem of housing

Finding housing when moving abroad can be challenging from various points of view and this theme comprises participants' narratives and experiences related to housing issues, identifying two sub-themes: finding an accommodation and living with other people for the first time.

According to participants, finding an accommodation abroad represents one of the main needs of international students, reporting to have often relied on agencies and specific housing services for international students to find a house as well as friends and acquaintances who had contacts with Italy:

[...] And about the living situation, here my dad has many friends who have business here in Italy, so he just found me a place [...] (Mark, M, 25, India)

Also University residences represent a resource for international students, however participants underlined that both private and university accommodation can not meet the high demand making it difficult to find a house:

Like, if you know that you don't have enough space, then accept less students! [...]It's not about getting more dorms, they won't do it, they don't have foundings, it's about government, if they give more money to the university, they can, but they won't get it. So It's better for them to accept less students, I guess. (Lisa, F, 22, Turkey)

Furthermore, living abroad was the first occasion in which all participants lived away from their family and found themselves sharing a private space with strangers, realizing the importance of having one's personal space:

[...] first year I lived in double room and you understand that how it's important to have your own personal space. This year, luckily, I'm living alone in my single room, but last year it was like, yeah, I like the girl, but it's very different. Yeah, I have to be alone sometimes. I have to, like, cry. I have to love on my own. So when I like, when I went to Turkey first time last year. And when I entered my room, like I cried a bit because, like, I missed that privilege, it feels very privileged to have your own space with your own stuff. (Sage, F, 24, Turkey)

According to participants, despite living with other people can be strange, having flatmates is considered better than living alone as they can represent an important resource for each other:

when you get a student apartment is already way better, cause like the probability of getting along better is higher [...] (Mia, F, 22, USA)

I watch movies with my other roomates or we just cook together, we spend time doing normal things that we have to do but together. And then me and one of my roomates, we have one class together so when It's getting annoying we sit together so It seems more fun. (Sarah, F, 20, Trinidad e Tobago)

3.3 Coping with difficulties

This overarching theme comprises a series of themes and sub-themes related to strategies aimed at overcoming difficulties faced by international students during their experience abroad, identifying two sub-themes: useful strategies for international students to overcome difficulties and requests for the country and University.

3.3.1 Useful strategies for international students to overcome difficulties

This theme focuses on strategies participants found useful in order to overcome challenges faced during their experience abroad and it comprises six sub-themes: learn and practice Italian (the local language), be prepared when dealing with bureaucracy, find your best solutions for healthcare, be wise and patient in finding an accommodation, be open to new people and make friends, challenge your food habits, share and explore! and ask for support to friends in the host country.

Finding ways to practice Italian is considered useful in order to overcome linguistic barriers, which can be achieved by following Italian classes provided by the University, learning few words in the local language before moving to Italy, engaging in conversations in Italian in safe contexts such as ordering in bars and restaurants, as well as using gestures:

Yeah, I enrolled in A1 and now I regret because I think I could learn those things from Duolingo and maybe enrolled in A2 or B1. (Sarah, F, 20, Trinidad e Tobago)

I would say also always order in Italian, even if you make a mistake...because like I don't get to speak Italian a lot anyway so if I don't do it when I'm ordering something then I never do it (Lisa, F, 22, Turkey)

According to participants, not being shy, engage with Italian friends and ask them for help when knowing Italian is needed represent useful strategies to overcome linguistic barriers:

Yeah, I would also say don't be shy...and maybe engage more with Italian friends ...(Mark, F, 24, Turkey)

When I was renting my house I really needed someone who could speak Italian really well so I brought my friends with me otherwise I don't know if I would have an house...so that's good... find good Italian friends, people who would be happy to help you. (Lisa, F, 22, Turkey)

Furthermore, according to participants' narratives, being prepared when dealing with bureaucracy represents a key to overcome bureaucratic issues in the best way possible, pointing out the importance of apply for documents before October, making always sure to

have the right documents and going to public offices as early as possible in order to shorten the bureaucratic process:

I think, in terms of the beginning of the process, go for your cards before october, because if you wait until october you would get your appointment for like 6 months later...It's just like so many people arrive between october and december so, if you can go like between june and july or august instead, I think also september can be good, but if you can go earlier that's even better. And at the Post Office is the same, because there are less students. (Sarah, F, 20, Trinidad e Tobago)

I do have an advice...I would say go before...because you have an hour...like on the paper you have an hour, but don't go on that time, just go before they open the building, like I usually go at 6 am or 6.30, because they open like at 7.30, because there are not lots of people in line, there still people also before you always, you are never the first one, but then you have to wait until they open the door and it's really early so they are more tolerant, because the day hasn't started yet...So if you go early in the morning, you will be done 15 minutes after you entered the building.[...] (Lisa, F, 22, Turkey)

Difficulties in accessing health-care also push international students in finding ways to overcome such a problem and, according to participants, bringing medicines from back home represents a useful solution in order to avoid going to the doctor in the host country:

Well my suggestion would be...not create a situation where you need to go to the doctor! (Mark, M, 25, India)

Actually I brought everything, I don't think I have anything that I...I have everything that I might need...I have all for burns, allergies, antibiotics, colds...(Lisa, F, 22, Turkey)

However, when accessing health care is needed, having insurance and the right documents is useful, as well as checking opening hours:

I would say having the right documents...because they won't see you if you don't have all set up right. (Sarah, F, 20, Trinidad e Tobago)

Okey and what about... specifically to Italy...like check the opening hours (Mia, F, 22, USA)

Preparing a list of questions and using google translate are also reported as useful strategies to communicate with doctors, as well as rely on italian friends:

I am...well I should be! My strategy was to drive my entire roommates with me...[...] But they couldn't come into the doctor's office so I relied on google translate. (Sarah, F, 20, Trinidad e Tobago)

According to participants, finding an accommodation abroad is a long process which requires patience and calm, keep looking online and start the research as early as possible, trying to rely on agencies that have experience with international students.

Participants reported that compliment someone, find something in common, tell a joke to people who smile you back or engage with other students waiting in line represent helpful strategies to ease the challenging process of starting a conversation with strangers which requires to not be shy or afraid, always remembering that other people share the same desire to build friendships:

As an advice I would say compliment someone or find something in common because sometimes, when I'm studying and I see a sticker on someone's computer and it's something that I like as well, about music, a tv show or whatever, I go like "oh I love that show" and then we start talking and that's a good thing, if you have something physical that you can communicate because otherwise you have to be like "hi, my name is this, do you wanna be friends?"...and if you have something for example a particular hair color and you say like oh I like your hair, I'd like to dye my hair that color then you can start talking about it and that's something... (Lisa, F, 22, Turkey)

Yeah, I also made lot of friends waiting in line because you do that a lot [...] So when you are in line you can start joking about it and then you start talking "what are you doing here, I'm here for this" and [...] Do you want to have lunch together and then go back in line? And you have a new friend! (Sarah, F, 20, Trinidad e Tobago)

Yeah, and it's very easy to meet people here because everyone want to meet everyone. (Sarah, F, 20, Trinidad e Tobago)

All participants reported coping with different food habits bringing food from their home countries or asking friends to import food from other places as well as trying new Italian dishes and trying to explore tastes of other cultures, organizing "international dinners" involving people from different countries, sharing different food and learning new recipes:

For that one I trust my friends...when they leave they bring the best things from their countries so for my birthday my friend gave me lots of sausages (Sarah, F, 20, Trinidad e Tobago)

Actually the first dinner I've ever hosted was like for my friends who were like italian and international students, I did a turkish night and I cooked for them like turkish plates, with traditional turkish music. I did it with a friend of mine, who is turkish as well and It was nice, because we were teaching like how to eat what, what goes with what and that was really fun... We liked doing that! (Lisa, F, 22, Turkey)

So you can cope like with learning new dishes from different cultures so that you don't have to miss yours all the time (Lisa, F, 22, Turkey)

Participants also reported that their coping strategies have changed while studying abroad, underlining that friendships play a much more important role than in the past, when the family was the main source of support:

Yeah. I mean, I guess is not like that at home. From home I guess I have friends but if I have some problems I go to family first. I guess that now that I am far from family and friends I go to them when I am not feeling so good. (Sarah, F, 20, Trinidad e Tobago)

3.3.2 Requests for the country and University

This theme collects narratives and experiences of participants underlining the important role covered by the country and the University, as two institutions able to influence international students' opportunity to overcome difficulties by changing policies, implementing activities and more and it comprises three sub-themes: make bureaucracy accessible for international students, support international students with housing and foster socialization with other students.

According to participants, having a student visa instead of a residence permit would make the bureaucratic process easier, less expensive and faster as well as creating separate desks for students and immigrants in public offices:

Yeah, like having a visa instead of permesso di soggiorno, like every other country! [...] In other places, like England...you get a visa for studying and that's it...no reapplying, no paying money every year...and you are done (Sarah, F, 20, Trinidad e Tobago)

My advice for the country would be: separate the students from immigrants [...] Because it shouldn't be the same line for us, like usually it takes really...like 10 minutes when you get to the police officer...(Lisa, F, 22, Turchia)

Participants also required support in finding an accommodation, underlined that the university and the country could collaborate in order to provide more accommodations and secure some apartments available for international students or welcome less students in order to guarantee adequate spaces for all:

Okey, you know, not to get political but for all the international students here, there should be at least some accommodating non-racist, so maybe better international acceptance or something...(Mia, F, 22, USA)

I mean, I think my advice for the university would be like get less students (Lisa, F, 22, Turkey)

Yeah, that's the problem! If you accept so many international students...(Mia, F, 22, USA)

...just make sure you have space! (Lisa, F, 22, Turkey)

According to participants' narratives, another important topic concerns the role of the university in fostering socialization among students through the creation and promotion of social opportunities. Participants reported that the University could be very helpful by implementing university clubs, following the structure of other foreign universities.

I think that this is also a problem in the university [...] There are a lot of international students, especially now, but there is not a lot of activities that you can do in english [...] here there is nothing except from the regular things like theater and sport teams and the basics ones but not specific ones, even in italian, that's a bit of shame. I'd love to join some clubs, create networks and meet people but...(Lisa, F, 22, Turkey)

3.4 International students' well-being

The last overarching theme comprises a series of themes and sub-themes reporting participants' narratives related to the construct of well-being, with regard to their experience as international students. Three themes have been identified: personal meanings, aspects supporting well-being and aspects affecting well-being.

3.4.1 Personal meanings

The first theme tells of personal meanings and constructions of well-being provided by participants, which have been grouped into two sub-themes: being able to trust yourself and finding your balance.

Participants recognized the ability to trust themselves as one of the aspects defining their construction of well-being, which allows them to be able to enjoy the moment, understand what is best for them and act without second thoughts or anxiety, providing a sense of security.

[...] like being able to be in the present because, like, when a little stress happens, stuff like that, if I, like, overthinking and getting stressed out about it. I'm not preserving wellbeing because I'm not actually living in the moment. I'm living in my head, so yeah, it's important to live in the moment or recognize the negative And go on and either resolve the negative or continue with the positive, so then resolve the negative and whatever bridge that balance, this is necessary. [...] Because that's also in the sense of, you know, well-being to be able to make the right decisions for yourself. (Mia, F, 22, USA)

Yeah, I mean regardless of the decisions you make, there is no absolute right or wrong. [...] So you just go for it and if you continue to grow, it is going to lead somewhere, rather than just sitting and thinking about it, not doing anything. (Mark, M, 25, India)

According to participants, well-being does not represent a condition of happiness or absence of difficulties, but rather the ability to maintain a balance and be content with life, adjusting to new situations, finding a new equilibrium and being able to cope with difficulties.

And I was also thinking to like having a power or, like being able to cope with the stressful situations, because there will be some ones in our lives that, like, there will be something stressful, but if we can be able to cope with it, we can maintain our well-being so it's also being able to, I don't know how to call it, to look forward to having resistance to cope difficult situations. [...] Maybe just like for me it's a bit weird to say, like, if you don't have anything in your life which is negative, so you're fine. You know, it's too basic. [...] So, well, there should be something that you can preserve while you have like negative situations. You have to, like, maintain your balance, and wellbeing yeah. So it's not that much about absence of negative situations, but being able to cope with those also. (Sage, F, 24, Turkey)

3.4.2 Aspects supporting well-being

This theme tells about aspects participants found able to positively influence their well-being while studying abroad, including four sub-themes: dedicating time to yourself, having a routine/plan and being organized, having a social support to rely on and being involved in social activities and handling one's future/opportunities.

Several activities such as self-care, watching movies, baking and cooking, cultivating an hobby, walking and being in contact with nature have been reported as activities participants do in order to support their well-being, dedicating some time to themselves:

Baking and movie night, they are definitely my favorite things. I added a ukulele time...I'm not doing it every day or anything, but [...] I think that it just makes me happy. I think like anything to do with creativity, like drawing or anything I think [...] (Lisa, F, 22, Turkey)

Also having a solid routine and being organized have been identified as positively affecting well-being:

[...] or having an actual like type of plan. [...] And just like kind of turned into that because it's like, even if my weeks are always changing and the days are always changing, I could bring some stability into that. I know that also we enjoy the week a little bit better [...] (Mia, F, 22, USA)

[...]I don't get bored of doing those stuff. Maybe I should get, but it makes me feel okay and I like to have those routines in my life [...] (Sage, F, 24, Turkey)

Another important resource for participants' well-being consists in spending time with friends, having social support to rely on as well as being involved in social activities with other people:

[...] last week I said that social support is really important for well-being. And whenever you look at the schedule that I have, I realized that every day I am meeting with my friends, like every day with same people. We drink coffee together at least 2-3 hours. Sometimes it's even more. And yes it is like contribute to my well-being in a positive way [...] (Sage, F, 24, Turkey)

I would definitely say that I don't like to be alone when I am upset, because if I am alone I end up crying and if you are with another person, you cry as well but you are not alone. Crying alone is worse than crying next to someone [...] (Lisa, F, 22, Turkey)

Also, doing something for one's future and opening to new opportunities is recognized as a positive aspect influencing one's well-being, making participants feel able to handle their lives:

[...] I become really happy to do something for my future [...] if I study by myself without any reinforcement, if I like do some research or write some stuff, I feel good, because I feel like I did something which is beneficial for me [...] (Sage, F, 24, Turkey)

3.4.3 Aspects affecting well-being

This theme tells about aspects participants found able to affect their well-being while studying abroad, including three sub-themes: dealing with obligations, lacking of social support and dealing with relationship drama.

Dealing with obligations related to work or study is recognized as something negatively impacting participants' well-being, leading to a strong sense of guilt and frustration if they feel they are not productive. This can be connected to the difficulty lived by participants' in deciding to behave differently than usual (e.g. procrastinating and doing other leisure activities instead of studying) as they do not recognize themselves in that possibility, without taking into consideration that they are living a new experience with its peculiarities (studying abroad). Fearing the sense of guilt stemming from procrastination and rest, obligations can limit students' opportunity to take care of themselves and support their well-being.

[...] I feel like most of the things that makes me feel good also makes me feel bad because I think that there are so many applications, which are making me stressed so whenever I do something that makes me feel good to reduce my stress, I feel like I'm wasting my time so if I have a lot to study and I have also lectures, or when I don't have lectures but I need to study, but I don't actually study and I draw or watch netflix and even though it makes me feel good, it makes me feel bad because I am procrastinating[...] (Jenny, F, 21, Serbia)

Maybe we don't have the same set reactions to not being productive but we still feel some type of way, some type of guilt or frustration [...] (Mia, F, 22, USA)

Lacking of social support and not having the possibility to share feelings and problems with friends is reported as something negatively affecting participants' well-being, who underlined that one's ability to share emotions with others is strongly influenced by gender and cultural standards, noticing that males peers talk about their feelings less than females and that in some cultures (e.g. India) this can be even more accentuated:

I think is good to have someone to talk to but, ehm I think mh...I need some...I am upset and I just go for a walk or something, I guess. It probably be a stereotype but I don't know...um...we are more, I don't know...It is like It is, we are not that expressive. (Mark, M, 25, India)

[...] I overshare sometimes, I talk about it, I ask my [...] guy friends if they want to talk about it because I know that they are going through something. [...] Sometimes they are like "I don't wanna talk about this, I wanna take it for myself" and I understand, but if they wanna share I am always there and I find it weird that their closest friends, like their best friends they don't know a lot about each other...(Lisa, F, 22, Turkey)

According to participants', being involved in discussion and dealing with negative relationships can negatively affect international students' well-being, especially when parents or close friends at home are involved, recognizing that arguing with significant others can have a stronger impact on their well-being rather than discussing with a stranger. These conflictual situations with beloved ones could in fact enhance the feeling of being alone at a distance, impacting students' well-being and the quantity of social connections with significant others, as they represent one of the main sources of support and socialization:

[...] but then the negative interactions, it brings you down. Like if you get into an argument with your family or a close friend, at least for me, it's way more...it kind of totally brings me down the way more than just get into an argument with a random person, you know (Mia, F, 22, USA)

4. Participation, interaction in the group sessions and artworks

Interactions among participants involved in the in-presence group intervention has been also taken into account as a qualitative index capable of enriching qualitative data collected through thematic analysis and accounting for the objective of the intervention to constitute itself a relational space, where participants could meet other international students and share common experiences. Observations of participants' interactions will be presented for each meeting and paired with artworks created by participants in the same session, dividing them by meeting and following a chronological order. The decision to pair observations concerning participants' interactions and artworks accounts for the process followed by participants in the creation of the artwork itself, which has always been the result of a group elaboration, shared by the participants, who were asked to confront each other in the construction of shared meanings related to the topic addressed during the meeting, giving the research team the opportunity to observe how participants interact with each other coming to a shared decision.

4.1 First session

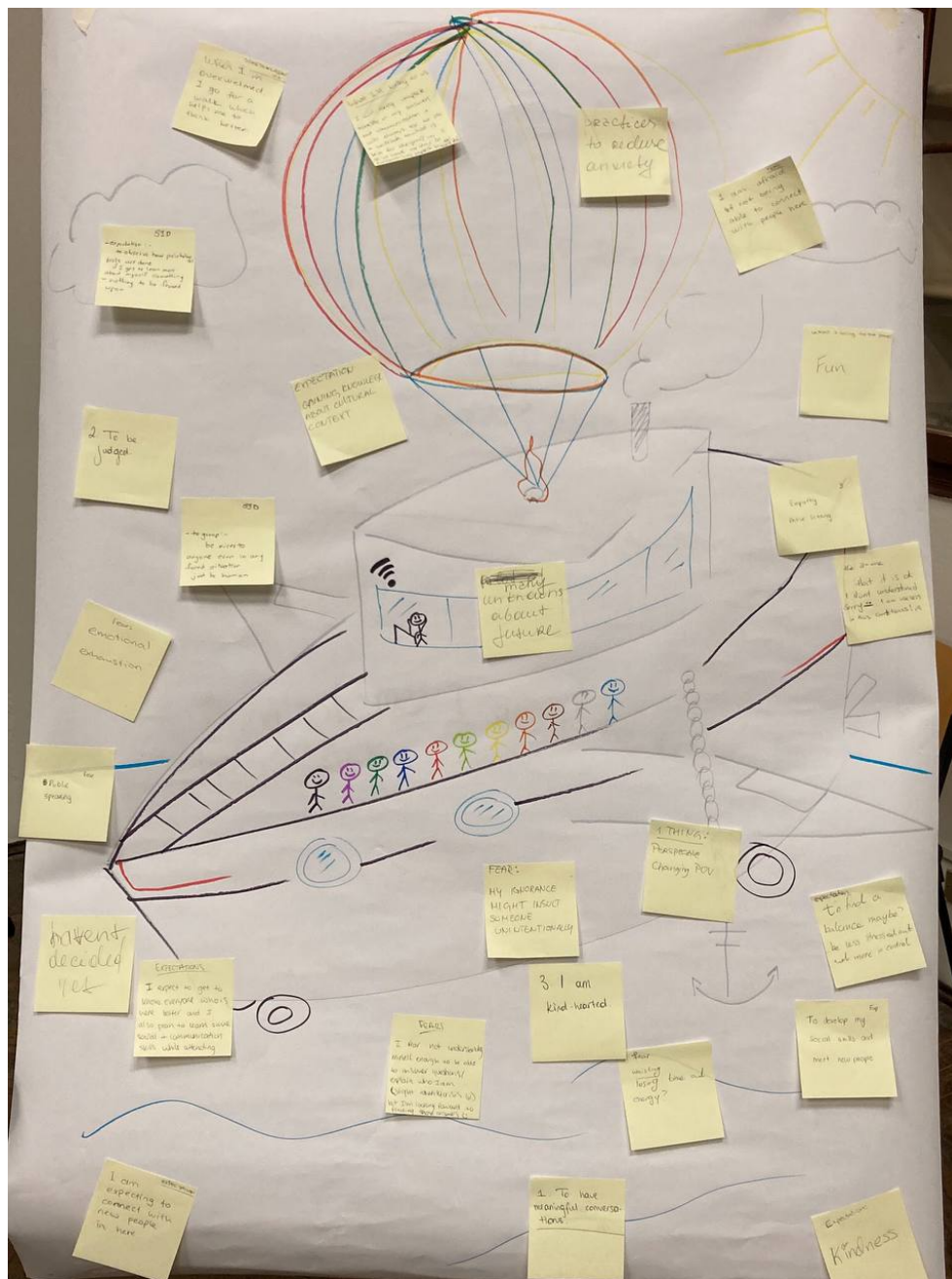
The first part of the first session was dedicated to playing a game aimed to ease the creation of the group, where interactions among participants were driven by rules of the game and the majority of interactions between participants occurred while creating the artwork.

Participants were asked to reflect on personal expectations about the group activity and after sharing them freely in the group, they were proposed to create a group artwork representing a metaphor that could hold their expectations related to this experience. Jenny (F, 21, Serbia), communicating to the group to be passionate about drawing, proposed to draw the artwork (*Figure 4*), being accepted by other members of the group who collaborated in its creation and contents. After sharing their ideas, participants came up with a metaphor about a travel/journey, that they decided to represent in terms of themselves on a means of transportation which was composed of different features proposed by participants: a ship, a plane and a hot air balloon.

Participants were also asked to think about one personal feature they could give/share with others as well as expectations and fears concerning the experience of participating in the group.

During the first meeting participants tended to talk more when asked rather than speaking and intervening independently and the moderator had a central role in driving conversations. However, some participants tended to speak more easily than others, those who mainly adopted ironic and sarcastic tones during activities, expressing perplexities about the objectives of the sessions (in terms of not meeting their expectations) later informed the research team that they could no longer attend the meetings.

Figure 4. First artwork created by the group.



Participants expected different things from the experience, such as having fun, learning practices to reduce anxiety, gaining knowledge about cultural content and getting to know new people, fearing public speaking, judgment, emotional exhaustion, the possibility to offend someone by saying something wrong and more.

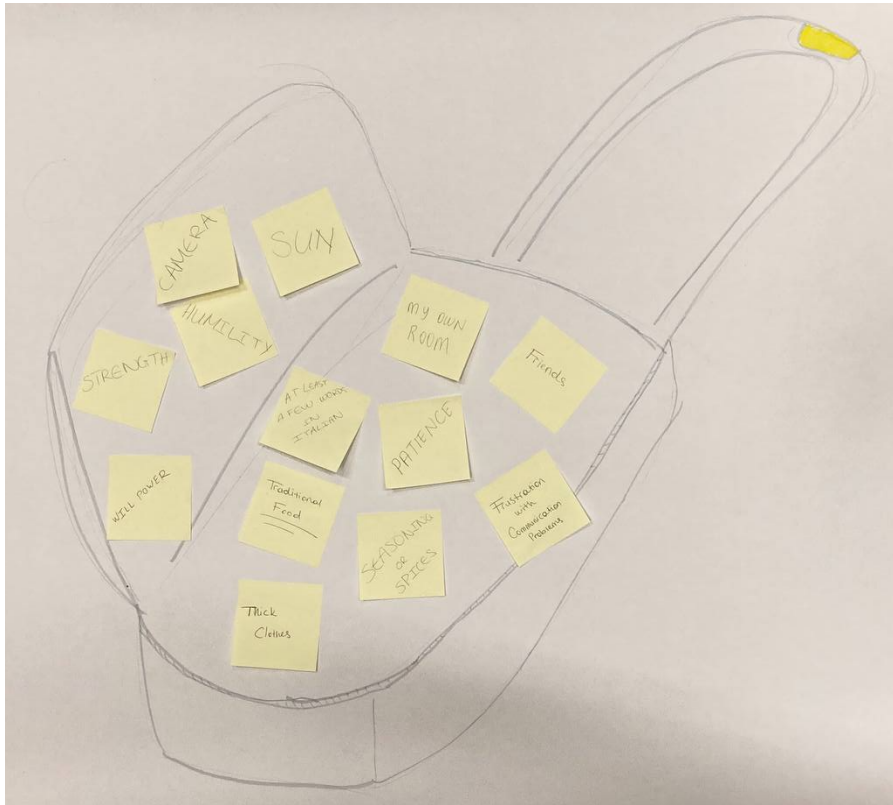
4.2 Second session

During the first part of the meeting participants were asked to reflect and share their personal experiences related to the moment they decided to pursue their academic education abroad as well as how they got prepared to leave their home countries. At the beginning of the meeting several periods of silence have been registered, occurring both when the moderator asked a question and when a participant finished the speech, a trend decreasing with the progress of the meeting when the main role covered by the moderator consisted in facilitating participants in deepen what they were saying, asking for further explanations or examples.

Each participant shared their personal experiences, mostly engaging with the moderator rather than with other participants. During the first part of the meeting, when they were required to think and report their experience, participants rarely interacted with each other.

The artwork (*Figure 5*) proposed in the second meeting consisted in creating together the “ideal luggage” for international students leaving for this experience. Participants were invited to create a luggage and to fill it with those elements (concrete and abstract) that they consider fundamental in order to face the experience of studying abroad, reflecting in light of their wisdom gained during the period spent in Italy. At the beginning of the process, after deciding the color of the luggage and choosing that Sarah (F, 20, Trinidad e Tobago) would draw, participants stayed in silence rather than start immediately the discussion concerning elements they would have put in the luggage. Once they started creating the luggage together only a few moments of silence were registered, in fact participants started to talk between them, confronting their experiences and reflections. Every participant had the time and occasion to express and share their experiences, and in the creation process each participant asked the others if they agreed with his/her idea before adding anything to the drawing.

Figure 5. Second artwork created by the group.



The luggage of the international student should contain: the sun, a camera, thick clothes, traditional food, willpower, patience, humility, strength, friends, one's room, frustration with communication problems.

4.3 Third session

During this meeting Mia and Jenny, who knew each other and were friends, often engaged in a dual conversation making it difficult at times for the other participants to join the conversation. As the meeting went on, Mia began to take on a mediating role, trying to limit the dual exchanges and attempting to involve in the conversation other participants by asking them questions.

During the meeting participants shared and reflected on their personal definition of well-being, addressing things capable of both supporting and challenging their well-being,

confronting ideas and discussing together. The artwork (Figure 6) consisted in the representation of a shared perspective about well-being. The group didn't succeed in the creation of a shared idea about well-being but rather created an artwork that put together personal elements of each person, in fact, compared to the second meeting, the third artwork has been created more individually, participants have interacted less with each other to create a common view, but rather proposed a combination of personal perspectives.

Figure 6. Third artwork created by the group.



The artwork represents “the room of well-being”, where outside the room are factors capable of negatively influencing well-being such as lack of initiative, guilt, relationships drama, overthinking, etc. and inside the room, those positively influencing well-being, such as taking time for oneself, social support, the ability to trust oneself, rest and more.

“So being true to yourself [...] in a sense no one can put a sticker of whether it is right or wrong, but your well-being shouldn't be decided about others.” (Mark, M, 25, India)

4.4 Fourth session

Since the beginning of the meeting participants were very engaged in the conversation and the moments of silence between them were very few. Unlike previous meetings, participants laughed more often and started talking directly to each other when sharing their personal experiences, asking each other directly questions and replying to them.

During the meeting participants discussed and shared their personal experiences concerning activities they usually do in order to support their well-being and the artwork (Figure 7) consisted in the creation of a drawing which could represent an activity they could do all together in order to feel good. Participants talked a lot between each other both to share their personal point of views and to find a shared activity to be then produced in the artwork. The process of identifying an activity capable of taking into account the perspectives of each participant led to a more participated artwork creation, in which each participant took part drawing a part of it, rather than choosing one person to be the artist of the artwork, as occurred in the previous meeting.

Figure 7. Fourth artwork created by the group.



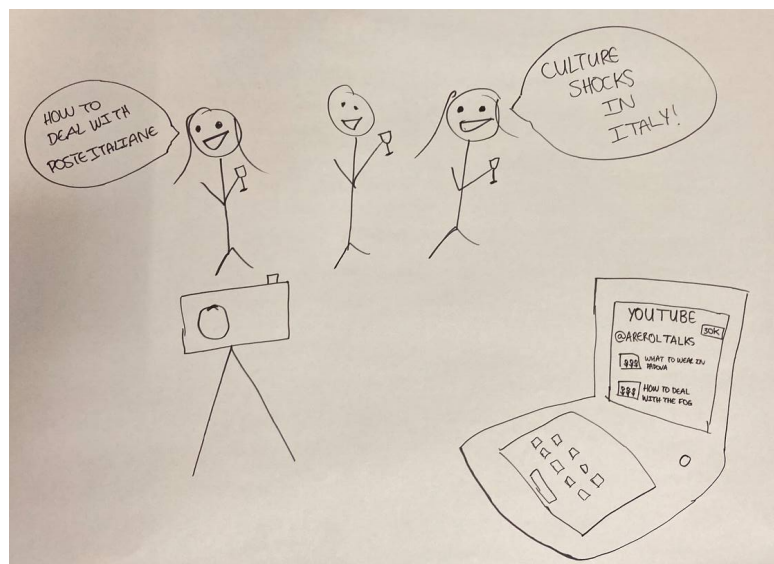
The artwork represents one activity participants could do all together with the aim to enhance their well-being, consisting in watching Friends, eating brownies, while having a face mask on and sitting on a comfortable couch.

4.5 Fifth session

Each participant actively participated in the meeting, often laughing and actively engaging with all the members of the group. Interventions of the moderator were few and were mostly aimed to summarize what participants had shared and introduce the following topic or activity.

During the session participants discussed and shared their personal experiences with social media and digital tools as international students, addressing their role in helping them to get prepared to move abroad and remain in contact with friends back home as well as to create new relationships abroad. The artwork (Figure 8) consisted in the ideation and artistic creation of a social media that they would have found useful before leaving their countries to study abroad. During the process leading to the final drawing, participants talked to each other, laughing and joking, and taking every decision together, also reporting that creating such social media could be done, representing a useful tool for international students.

Figure 8. Fifth artwork created by the group.



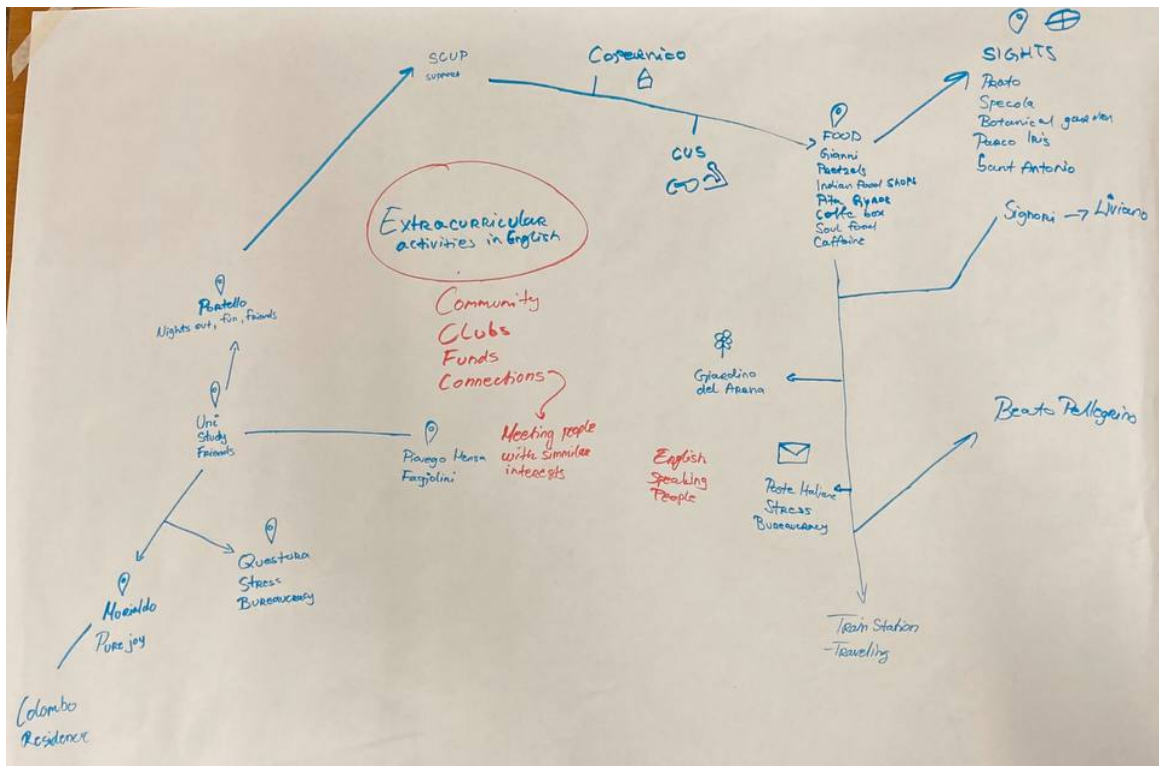
The useful social media for international students is a YouTube channel called AperolTalks, where participants share information and curiosities they gained while studying abroad. First videos will be: how to deal with Poste Italiane, culture shocks in Italy, what to wear in Padova and how to deal with the fog.

4.6 Sixth session

During the meeting participants interacted often with each other laughing and, compared to previous meetings, the participants who had less interaction with the others started actively taking part in the conversation independently. During the session, whose main topic concerned available resources and important places for participants in the city of Padua, all participants elaborated the questions proposed going beyond the topics, sharing suggestions and curiosities with the group, and asking questions.

The artwork (*Figure 9*) consisted first in the exploration and spotting of one's favorite places of the city playing with a map of Padova, to share with each other their personal choices; and then in the creation of a map of Padua that comprehended important places for participants as international students, in terms of practical, psychological, relational etc. resources that have been important for them and could be useful for other international students as well.

Figure 9. Sixth artwork created by the group.



Participants found many important places around the city, including those who represent a necessity (questura, poste, train station, etc.), places they find important for them (e.g. their house) and they like (e.g. city center) as well as places where they can find their favorite food, spend time with their friends and much more! The map also includes what they found is missing in Padua: extracurricular activities in English to meet people with similar interests and English speaking people.

4.7 Seventh meeting

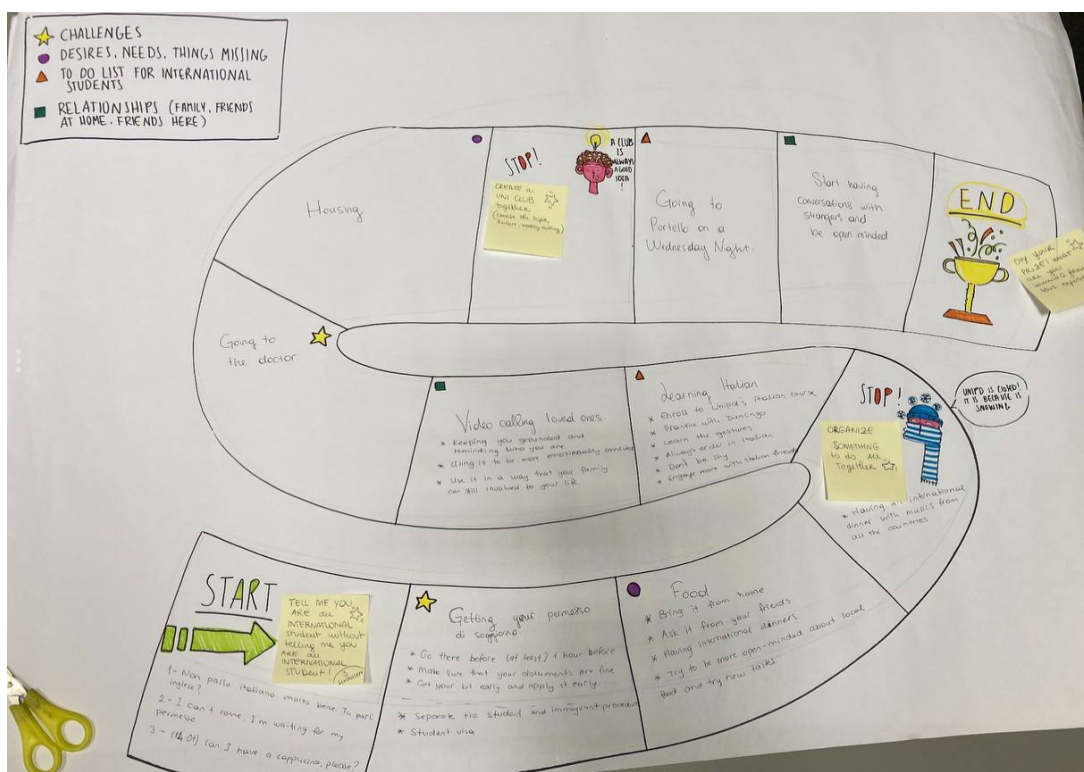
In this meeting participants were invited to take part in a created ad hoc board game that summed up all the topics discussed together during the sessions. This was created to help them establish and support the information shared during the session and have fun together. For this reason this time the artwork (Figure 10) has been created step by step during the whole meeting as participants played the game. Participants were all involved in the

conversation, joking and laughing, sharing personal experiences and telling funny stories related to their experiences in Italy. The main role of the moderator consisted in managing the timing of the session, as participants often started talking and telling stories taking a long time to complete each box.

Each decision was taken after discussing among each other, taking into consideration every opinion and experience and, towards the end of the meeting participants expressed their regret as the experience was about to end:

“So will next time be our last? [...] That’s sad, actually I adore coming here, I really enjoy it, so that’s gonna be sad” (Lisa, F, 22, Turkey)

Figure 10. Seventh artwork created by the group.



The artwork consisted in completing the board game, adding challenges, needs/desires, relational issues and things international students should do in Padua, summarizing topics

addressed in previous meetings, and then trying to provide suggestions to other international students based on participants' gained wisdom.

4.8 Eighth session

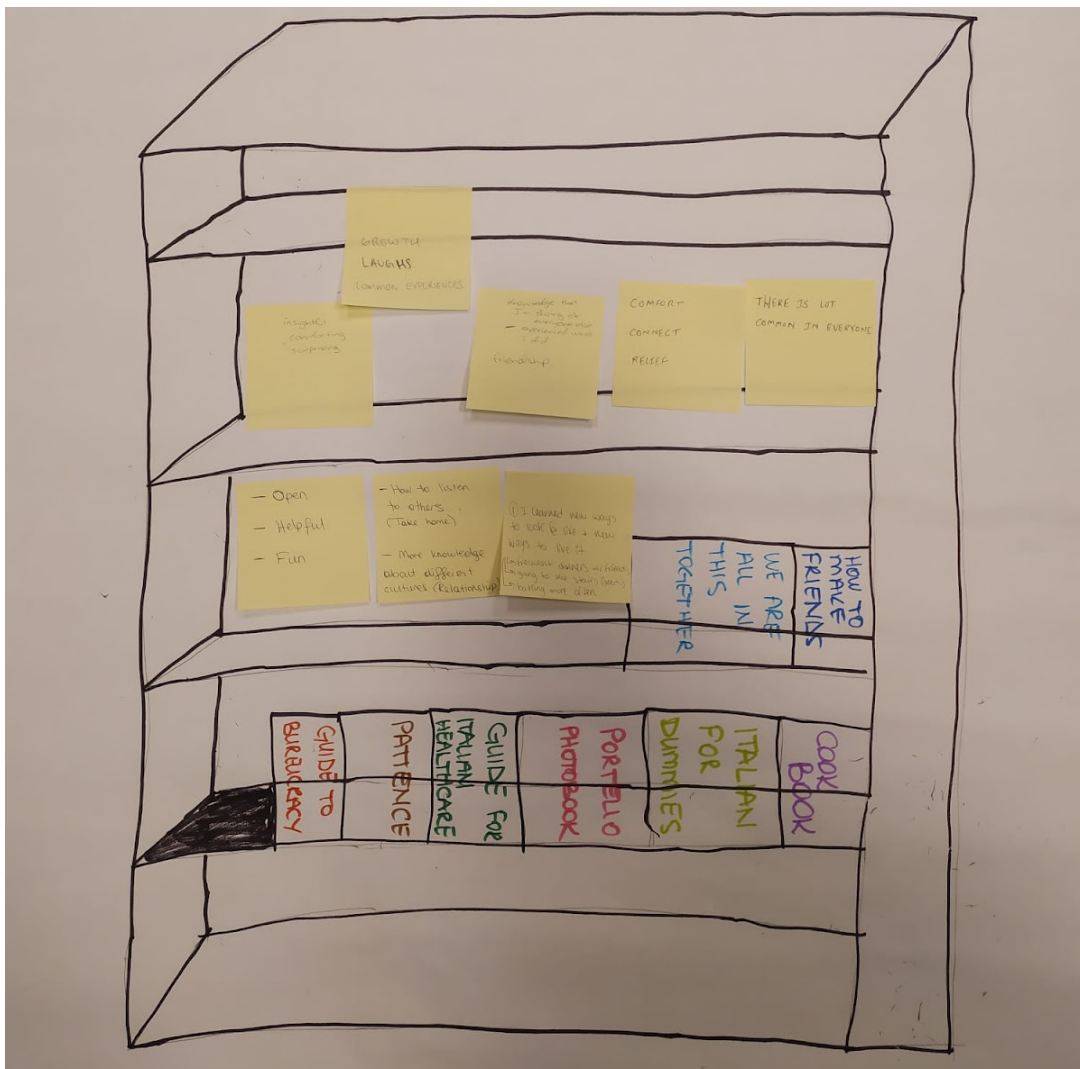
Participants engaged with each other from the beginning of the meeting, during which the moderator did not have many occasions to talk, as participants shared lots of stories and experiences with each other, her main role was indeed to help the group manage times in order to complete activities. Through previous meetings interaction with participants constantly increased, reaching their peak towards last sessions, when participants turned to each other while talking, referring less to the moderator compared to the group. During the last meeting participants were more autonomous in proceeding with the game they started the previous session and the general tone was cheerful and jovial, numerous laughs were recorded and moments of silence were almost absent. After the end of the board game, participants were invited to a reflection going in the direction of closing the group experience shared together. In this process they were invited to think of a metaphor to represent the group at the end of the experience and then put this metaphor into a group's drawing. Participants were all actively involved in the discussion and each opinion was taken into consideration by others. Part of the artwork (*Figure 11*) consisted in answering three questions asked by the moderator related to outcomes of the experience, the questions were to (1) find three words to describe the just-ended experience, (2) one take-home from the experience and (3) one thing gained from relationships during the experience. After sharing their thoughts and creating the artwork, participants told us that they were happy with the experience in the group as they have found friendships and had the opportunity to have a space to share experiences with other international students, making them feel comforted, connected and relieved as reported also in the following quotations:

And what I get from the relationship here is great friendships because I feel like it's the start of something, you know...(Sarah, F, 20, Trinidad e Tobago)

Yeah...Yeah, in general I feel like there is a lot common in everyone, basically I just don't talk to many people so...that's what I think...that I would find to talk to a stranger, to talk about like...but now, by talking to other people I find that everyone is going through most of the same things...and the words I wrote are comfort because I felt very comfortable to talk about it, everything I mean and connected and the other thing is relieved. (Mark, M, 25, India)

And if we continue to be friends out of here, thank you for this. (Mark, M, 25, India)

Figure 11. Eight artwork created by the group.



Participants decided to represent the just-ended experience as a bookshelf filled with knowledge, memories and meanings related to the group experience as well as the whole

experience of being an international student and “We are all in this together” is the title they chose for the book representing the group.

Chapter 4: Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore experiences of international students enrolled in the University of Padua participating in a blended group intervention to promote well-being and social connectedness.

While in other countries, several studies (e.g. Gautam et al., 2016; Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2015; Singh, 2018) explored experiences of international students using qualitative methods of analysis, to our knowledge this is the first study conducted in Italy exploring experiences of international students enrolled in Italian universities using such methods.

Results showed that international students who decided to pursue their academic education in Italy share many common experiences with international students enrolled in universities worldwide, in terms of benefits stemming from such an experience as well as challenges, difficulties and coping strategies adopted in facing such challenges. Accordingly to available literature underlining that experiences of foreign students studying abroad are influenced both by personal and contextual factors (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019; Lee & Rice, 2007 cited in Sherry et al., 2010) and that challenges faced by international students depend also on the chosen destination (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019), our findings support the idea that the Italian context comprises peculiar aspects compared to other countries, especially as regards linguistic and bureaucratic issues, as well as different university settings, making the experience of international students in Italy different from other countries.

In line with previous studies (Cisneros-Donahue et al., 2012; Cubillos & Ilvento, 2013; Haas, 2018; Milian et al., 2015; Sisavath, 2021; Sobkowiak, 2019) highlighting existing benefits linked to the experience of studying abroad during college (e.g. gaining cultural and functional knowledge, self-efficacy, etc.), also international students enrolled in

the University of Padua experience a number of benefits by studying abroad, gaining cultural knowledge, becoming more independent, developing a sense of growth and strength. To this extent, benefits of studying abroad in Italy are largely shared with other countries, as international students in Padua also have the opportunity to meet people from all over the world, broaden their horizons, recognizing that they have profoundly changed during this experience.

According to our results, although perceived changes in oneself (e.g. sense of growth, strength, independence, etc.) stemming from the experience of studying abroad are generally appreciated and valued by participants, international students have also highlighted their potentially negative effect, related to the ability of such changes to foster conflict with their culture of origin and their family. In fact, participants reported the powerful effect that the culture of origin has on them abroad, acting at a very deep level and generating guilt when personal change comes into conflict with cultural values, principles and expectations. Cultural standards are often embodied by family members, whose role can become indeed controversial as, on one hand, international students miss their family members and try to connect with them as much as they can and, on the other hand they recognize parents to be a potential source of suffering, capable to negatively affect their well-being, making them feel the pressure to have left parents behind moving to another country and fearing to be judge or unrecognized by them. Cultural pressure shows itself through thoughts, family and behaviors, having a very strong impact on international students, committed to finding a balance between their culture and the change generated by the experience, as found also in other researches (Berry, 2005; Searle & Ward, 1990 cited in Bender et al., 2019), striving to reach a level of adjustment capable of holding personal changes together without losing their roots. The bilateral relationship with oneself in the country of origin and in the host country requires international students to make a number of efforts in order to construe themselves as

independent human beings, as they are always subjected to many cultural and relational simulations both from back home and in the host country.

Even recognizing that cultural standards and impositions might negatively affect their well-being, international students feel the need to get closer to their origins and home country relationships, especially in times of difficulty. Connecting with people who have known them for a long time, as well as seeking for scent and tastes that reminds them home, international students attempt to connect with their origins and with themselves, feeling reassured and grounded.

In line with other researches (e.g. Nabavi & Bijandi, 2018; Worae & Edgerton, 2023), participants in our study reported to rely on friends and family members as their primary source of social support. Maintaining relationships with loved ones and forming relationships in the host country is of much importance for international students going abroad, as they might feel more alone in the host country, due to the distance from their friends and family members (Poyrazil & Lopez, 2007). Accordingly to a previous study (Cipolletta et al., 2022) conducted in the University of Padua, highlighting that international students seem to rely more on friends or partners rather than family members when seeking for help, also participants in our study reported that, even if they connect with loved ones living in other countries often, not always being in contact with people back home has a positive impact on their well-being as it makes them feel homesick, feeling that being in a foreign country they are missing out on what friends and family members are living, acknowledging that they cognitively understand what relatives are living but struggling to feel deep emotions and sensations and experiencing an emotional detachment. Previous studies (e.g. Khawaja & Stallman, 2011) also underlined that international students tend to avoid sharing problems they face abroad with family members, perceiving that parents are not aware about challenges they have to deal with, expecting a lot from them.

Both as regards benefits and challenges encountered by international students, the Italian context shares several commonalities with other countries and results are widely in line with available literature (e.g. (Berry, 1997; Kim & Abreu, 2001 cited in Zhou & Zhang, 2014; Milian et al., 2015; Worae & Edgerton, 2023) providing evidence of difficulties faced by international students such as dealing with different food habits, linguistic barriers, cultural differences, residential issues and more. However, the Italian context shows two main peculiar aspects, differing from other countries hosting international students.

The first peculiarity concerns the language and its impact on the lives of international students, which seem to be very accentuated in the Italian context as it not only differs from English-speaking countries but also from non-English speaking countries. In Italy, institutions and the general population speak predominantly Italian, while in other non-English speaking countries English is adopted at least in academic and institutional environments. This peculiar aspect not only affects practical activities of international students living in Padua, making it difficult to access services such as health care and other public offices, but has even more effect on their relationships and well-being. Receiving instrumental support to overcome difficulties is often associated with negative outcomes and loss of independence (Reinhardt et al., 2006) which have been found also in our research, as international students enrolled in Italian universities are often forced to rely on other people to overcome such strong linguistic barriers. In addition, the fact that most Italian citizens do not know English and are reluctant to meet language differences, subjects international students to forms of racism and discrimination that limit the possibility of satisfying their basic needs such as owning a home and accessing health services, affecting their lives not only from practical but also emotional perspectives. International students enrolled in Italian universities might strongly suffer from existing linguistic barriers and according to results, also loneliness experienced by international students enrolled in the University of Padua is perceived as strongly linked to

linguistic barriers, the academic environment and their relationship. According to participants involved in the study, not only Italian universities do not adopt English as first language, providing the majority of activities and courses in Italian, but they also lack in providing extracurricular activities available to international students, which is one of the biggest shortcomings attributed to the University of Padua. Participants strongly addressed the lack of extracurricular activities such as university clubs, which are common in universities worldwide and are recognized to be great social resources for students, as highlighted by other researchers (Martirosyan et al. 2015 cited in Bender et al., 2019). To this extent, participants not only addressed the lack of the University in fostering students' socialization but most importantly, its potential beneficial role for the entire student population in line with another finding (Celik et al., 2023) and as well, in line with evidence reporting universities to be a crucial source of support for international students (Bai, 2016; Cho & Yu, 2015). Sumer et al. (2021) pointed out the importance of providing international students useful information once they arrive at the University, making available services spread on the territory (e.g. activities, seminars, etc.) more accessible, easing the adjustment process of international students. Since the University of Padua is increasingly moving in the direction of an international perspective, widening the proposal of activities, conferences, workshops and seminars in English, it seems necessary to us a reflection that takes into account the gap between the actual proposals of the University and the perception of international students, which could result from difficulties in communicating between students and the University.

However, regardless of the number of available activities, emphasizing the importance of having more social opportunities, participants highlighted their need for social connections, attributing to interpersonal relationships a crucial role in fostering their well-being. According to our findings, in line with other researches (e.g. Cho & Yu, 2015; Martirosyan et al. 2015 cited in Worae & Edgerton, 2023), the main factors affecting

international students' well-being, both in a positive and negative way, concern relational issues. Having a strong network of relationships is indeed something that all participants found positively supporting their well-being, while the lack of such support as well as arguing with loved ones were told as something capable of strongly decreasing their well-being. Findings from our research are in line with previous studies (Celik et al., 2023; Reinhardt et al., 2006), which underlined the dual role of social support, from which international students can benefit both from a practical and emotional point of view, highlighting that receiving practical support might result in a loss of independence (Reinhardt et al., 2006) while receiving emotional support is generally linked to positive outcomes (Celik et al., 2023). Participants indeed emphasized the role of local friends as a fundamental resource to overcome difficulties faced in the host country, valuing the opportunity to rely on Italian friends, but at the same time reporting that being forced to ask them for help leads to a loss of independence, becoming a source of suffering and humiliation. Participants emphasized that the benefit of social support comes mainly from the possibility of receiving mutual comfort, spending time together, distracting from problems and sharing common experiences. Being able to receive help to solve practical problems is certainly a positive aspect, but it takes second place to the possibility provided by the relationships cultivated in the host country of feeling understood, listened to and close to each other, even without arriving at the solution of the problem. Our findings are indeed in line with other studies (Al-Sharideh & Goe, 1998; Kashima & Loh, 2006; Li & Gasser, 2005; Ying & Han, 2006; Ying & Liese, 1994; Zhang & Goodson, 2011 cited in Smith & Khawaja, 2011) which underlined the importance of receiving support both from other international students and local ones in order to better adapt to the host country.

Spending time with friends in the host country is something that all participants reported to do on a daily basis, both carrying out necessary activities and killing time.

Supporting other researches highlighting the important effect of social support on international students' adjustment, well-being and health (e.g. Bender et al. 2019; Cho & Yu, 2015; Smith & Khawaja, 2011), participant reported that, although one of the factors most likely to negatively impact their well-being concerns procrastination on their obligations, when such procrastination is due to being with friends, its impact on well-being is lower compared to situations when the time lost is traced back to one's shortcomings that, instead, generate guilt. Our findings support indeed evidence from literature, underlining international students' need to share and normalize difficulties of studying abroad by discussing with other international students in a group setting (Dipeolu et al., 2017), which has been found to be a useful strategy to manage stress abroad (Khawaja & Stallman, 2011), feeling comforted and giving international students the opportunity to share advice and experiences.

Even underlining their need to receive support from other peers, services and institutions, participants have recognized themselves as potential resources for other international students, capable of suggesting useful coping strategies to face challenges they have met while studying abroad, which has been found also in previous studies (e.g. Khawaja & Stallman, 2011; Sumer et al., 2011; Wang, 2009) underlining that international students use a broad range of strategies to face challenges and difficulties abroad. Similarly to the research conducted by Khawaja and Stallman (2011), once identified major challenges they had to deal with, participants have reported useful coping strategies, making suggestions to future international students as well as the university and the whole country. As for the suggestions reported by the participants to other international students, many of these are in line with those reported by Khawaja and Stallman (2011), in particular concerning linguistic barriers, loneliness and social isolation. Participants in both studies have indeed emphasized the importance of engaging in social relationships abroad, recognizing existing difficulties in making friends in the foreign country and suggesting other international students to push

themselves in starting conversations, overcoming shyness, joining social activities and trying to engage with locals. Similarly to participants in Khawaja and Stallman's (2011) study, international students found that learning the local language in advance and attending courses provided by the university are useful strategies to improve language proficiency and overcome linguistic barriers. Furthermore, suggestions and requests participants gave to the host university and the host country (e.g. change bureaucratic procedures, provide more accommodations, social activities, etc.) underline their need of receiving support in dealing with difficulties abroad, highlighting the importance of available resources and emphasizing the crucial role local institutions can play in supporting their experience as well as pointing out which are the toughest perceived challenges they have to deal with.

4.2 A PCT perspective on the experience of studying abroad

As the conceptual framework in which the study was developed and carried out refers to a phenomenological approach, especially in the theoretical framework of the Psychology of Personal Construct (Kelly, 1955), authors have attempted to provide a PCT contested interpretation of the findings, in terms of understanding our students' experience of studying abroad and proving a visual snapshot of the process (reported in *Figure 12*), using professional constructs (*see Table 1, pag 18, chapter 1*) introduced by Kelly (1955).

According to the students' narratives, the decision of studying abroad represents for them a possibility of *dilation* (Kelly, 1955) of one's self and system of constructs. This experience in fact has been reported as an experience of personal growth, achieving dreams, answering their desire of broadening personal horizons, meeting new people and cultures allowing international students to actively explore new situations, people, contexts etc. elaborating those new elements and having the opportunity to broaden their system of constructs. Moving to another country, making new experiences and meeting new people in

fact has been reported as significant experiences for growing and becoming a new version of themselves, challenging their actual perspective on the world and potentially giving them the opportunity of imagining and construing possibilities and new alternatives for their future.

However, studying in a foreign country is not a linear experience without difficulties, in fact, as reported by international students, many new and unexpected elements of this experience made them face numerous challenges, finding themselves unprepared and/or struggling to find the best way to address them. Many challenges such as facing linguistic barriers, bureaucratic issues, cultural differences, social isolation and practical difficulties (e.g. finding housing), made students experience *anxiety* in terms of lacking personal constructs and resources to deal with similar difficulties (Kelly, 1955).

To face *anxiety*, participants adopted different ways of managing these challenging situations and tasks, varying according to personal situations, meanings and resources. According to our participants' narratives, it is possible to see that they have mainly adopted two strategies to face *anxiety*, one characterized by *aggression* and the other characterized by *hostility* (Kelly, 1955). It is not possible to group participants, dividing them in those who mainly responded to *anxiety* with *aggression* or with *hostility*, this because depending on many personal and contextual factors (e.g. the moment in which the challenge was lived, personal resources, practical disruptions etc.) they reported having addressed those challenges in different ways; some situations have been actively elaborated trying to find the best solution actively elaborating the situation and their system of constructs (*aggression*) (Kelly, 1955); while others were faced by not considering other ways rather the ones they already knew, generally leading to invalidation of one's *anticipation* and consequent anger and frustration (*hostility*) (Kelly, 1955).

When facing *anxiety* with *aggression*, participants have found creative solutions to overcome difficulties, actively looking for useful information, putting effort in learning the

local language, pushing themselves in overcoming shyness to engage in conversations with strangers, asking other people for help with things they could not sort out, etc.

In other situations *anxiety* has been faced with *hostility*, for example by deciding to spend the majority of one's time calling/staying in contact with people back home when feeling lonely instead of finding ways to create social connections abroad; by mainly engaging with co-national living abroad leading to isolation from locals, considered detached and unavailable to create relationships and, by avoiding opening to new people. Another example concerns anger participants showed against the University (e.g. for lack of activities) and the host country (e.g. for bureaucracy), linked to feelings of not being welcomed and understood, however not acting to change the situation, looking for information and/or asking for help to services, but rather obstinately waiting others to make changes.

According to participants' narratives, using those two perspectives focused on their meanings and attempts to experience well-being while abroad, we can find that elaborating one's well-being while abroad with *aggression* leads to challenging one's usual meanings of well-being, finding new ways to support one's well-being abroad. For example some reported having changed ways to cope with difficulties abroad, compared strategies they adopted back home, pushing themselves in creating new social connections in the host country as well as relying more on friends than family members, developing new practical abilities in solving problems and more. On the contrary, elaborating it with *hostility* leads to not exploring and elaborating new ways to feel good abroad, striking to one's already known ways to face difficulties and support well-being, as reported by some participants.

As previously stated, participants reported to have faced *anxiety* both with *aggression* and *hostility* depending on the different situations, resources and personal possibilities; according to our findings, the experience of socialization, as an opportunity to experience sharing personal meanings and experiences with others during this peculiar life experience,

had a crucial role in supporting or impacting international students' experience abroad. In fact, socialization with peers, both locals and other international students (both conational and not), during this experience supported the possibility of facing challenges with *aggression* by providing them with the opportunity of finding support, sharing emotions and personal stories, giving and receiving information and so on. On the contrary, facing challenges with *hostility* was mainly characterized by a lower opportunity of relying on others, giving and or receiving help, sharing emotions and personal stories with others with a higher isolation and sense of loneliness.

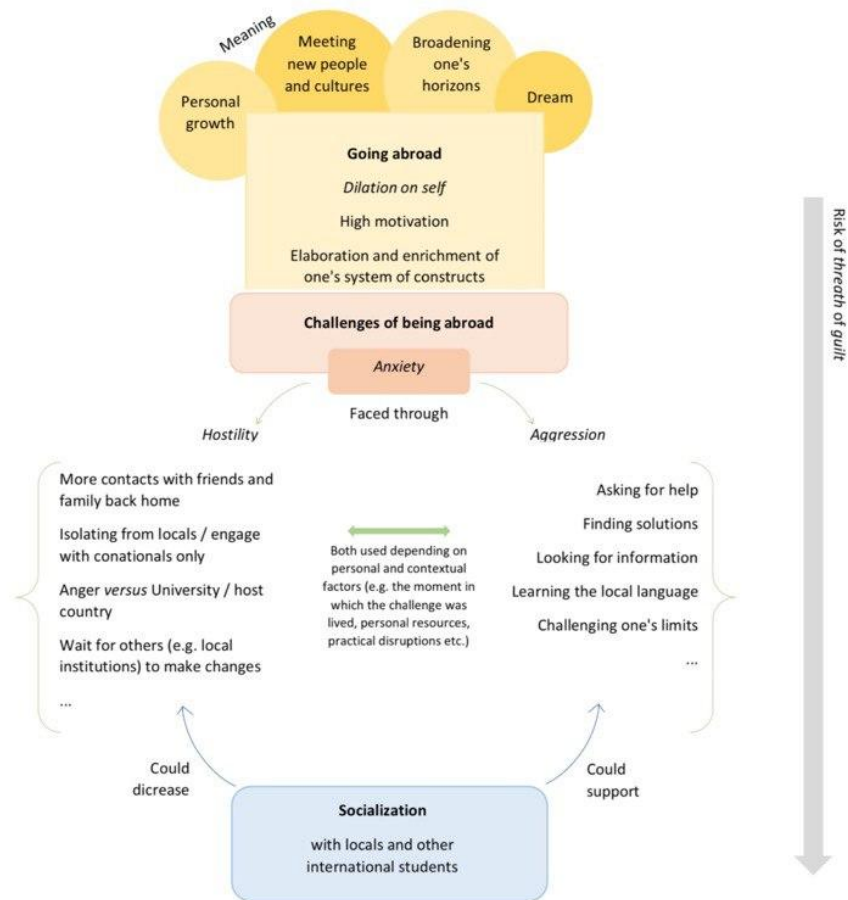
In this sense the opportunity of socialization with peers offered by the group activity implemented in this research project, sustained international students' personal resources, exchange of information and personal meanings, as well as made possible to confront with people living the same experience feeling understood and supported, while at the same time confronting with different narratives and ways of dealing with challenges, increasing ones' potential resources and relationships. Experiencing socialization, sharing personal meanings, strategies and experiences, might indeed support *aggression* providing other alternatives and supporting such strategies, and decrease *hostility* providing practical strategies and evidence related to positive outcomes that can stem from an active elaboration of the experience.

Another reflection comes within the taking into account that challenging one's system of constructs, by deciding to study abroad can also lead students to experience *threat of guilt*, in terms of being worried in anticipating that they could be changed by this experience and they and/or significant others could not recognize them for the person they were before this experience. This possibility was reported by participants who shared that when thinking of their home country they felt not anymore belonging to that place, family, cultural and social values but on the other hand they do not have yet another place, value, family etc. to belong to. The possibility of facing *guilt* represents an experience capable of affecting one's system

of constructs leading to strong experiences of psychological suffering that could impact one's mental health and well-being, an element to be taken into account. Supporting international students in this personal process through socialization with peers, offering psychological support in case of need and local resources do overcome difficulties could support their *aggression* in facing those challenging situations and prevent psychological distress stemming from fear of not recognizing oneself anymore and/or struggling to adapt to a new context.

To this extent, fostering socialization through interventions such as the one presented in our study, and supporting element of the context such as having a welcoming host country as well as a University setting capable of understanding international students' perspective and meeting their needs, could represent a useful strategy to improve international students' well-being supporting *aggressive* strategies in facing difficulties.

Figure 12. A visual representation of the process: international students' experiences interpreted in light of the PCT framework.



4.3 Limitations

We recognize that the study has several limitations as, first of all, it has involved a very small sample, which could result in a limited view of the experience of being an international student and, for example, limiting the opportunity to notice peculiarities linked to belonging to different cultural backgrounds. Also, the majority of participants were enrolled in courses related to the psychological field, which might have influenced results, again limiting the opportunity to collect data from other populations.

The mortality rate and absences have been higher than expected. One possible explanation concerns the period in which the intervention has been provided, occurring during the exam session which has been addressed by participants as one of the reasons they

were limited to attend meetings, as well as the fact that meetings took place during winter and several participants could not attend meetings because they were sick. Also, participants who retired after the first meeting, may have signed up to see the activities and decide whether to participate in the whole intervention or not. For this reason,

Concluding, data addressing participants' interactions as well as outcomes reported by participants concerning outcomes of the experience do not represent a measure of the effectiveness of the intervention which, however, would have been useful to evaluate systematically in order to extend the intervention to a greater number of international students.

4.4 Conclusions

The current research explored experiences of international students enrolled in the University of Padua also attempting to provide a way to promote well-being and social connectedness.

Developing studies exploring factors capable of affecting international students' well-being is particularly relevant, as it allows to identify potential targets of interventions aimed at promoting international students' well-being. This research sheds light on the importance of addressing the experience of international students enrolled in Italian universities as, according to findings, the Italian context comprises a series of peculiar aspects compared to other countries where the majority of studies has been conducted so far. Also, lacking studies conducted among international students enrolled in Italian universities, exploring their experiences through qualitative methods could be useful, in order to broaden the possibility to capture as much information as possible, without limiting the research focusing exclusively on evidence provided by studies conducted in other countries. Since this is a very recent line of research in our country, other cities could explore experiences of

international students enrolled in their universities, to reach a more complete view of the Italian situation.

In line with previous studies conducted worldwide, also this research has highlighted benefits and challenges faced by international students as well as factors capable of affecting their well-being while studying abroad. The research also contributed to deepen the knowledge concerning the experience of studying abroad, underlying both commonalities and differences between Italy and other countries hosting international students, pointing out peculiarities related to the Italian context such as linguistic barriers, bureaucratic and academic differences.

Results discussed in the present thesis could be considered as a starting point to explore further this population in future researches, as well as in providing the University of Padua and Italian Universities with a useful knowledge to address this population's needs and difficulties, developing and implementing specific services, as well as supporting them in socializing with their foreigner and local peers. For example, according to our findings and observational data, implementing interventions promoting social connectedness among international students seems to be a promising way of responding to needs such as establishing social connections and sharing common experiences with other peers, expanding the opportunities to further deepen the knowledge of the population of international students to develop increasingly targeted interventions. Our research also underlines that the opportunity to make "expert" international students a resource for younger ones should be considered. Even if the study involved a small sample of international students, the University of Padua as well as the local institutions could benefit from evidence of the current research, working together with the aim to deepen the knowledge concerning needs of foreign students living in Padua, taking into consideration the possibility of implementing services addressing this population to foster their satisfaction as well as as an opportunity to

establish themselves as valuable hosting institutions for international students who want to pursue their academic education in Italy.

The usefulness of the research consists both in having explored the experience of international students enrolled at the University of Padua for the first time, also identifying their needs, and in having provided a model of intervention that has been able to respond itself to one of the central needs of this population, promoting social connections among participants.

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Appendix 1

Figure 1. How to use this handbook (Chapter 1)

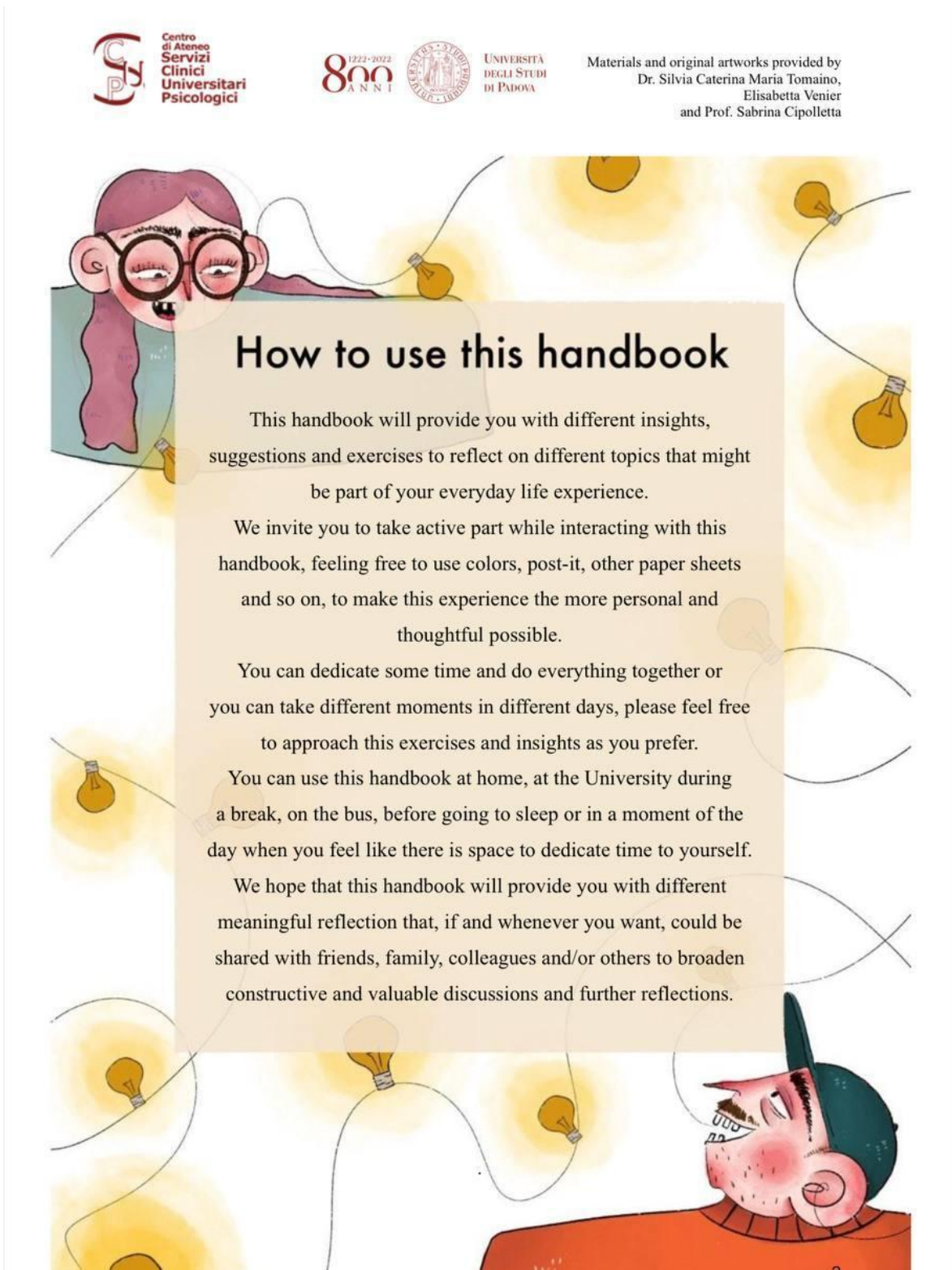


Figure 2. Insight (Chapter 1)

INSIGHT

From a general point of view we can say that we are taught and used to present to others in a certain way that is culturally and socially oriented.

Taking into account potential differences based on cultural and social specificities, we can say that somehow we know that if we share some aspects of ourself and we appear in a certain way people will get something about us.

When presenting to others we can decide to bring some aspects of ourself, for example by focusing the description on aspects such as work or study, personal interests and/or activities and more.

At the same time there are aspects that we cannot decide whether to share or not while presenting to others such as physical features, our accent, language and more.

Presenting to someone new activates many anticipations regarding the effect that my appearance and the information I will provide will have on the other's ideas of me, it is very common to feel a little bit of distress, anxiety and/or fear in encountering the other person for the first time.

It isn't unusual that we might find us asking ourselves "*are the information I am giving good enough? and/or are those good for the version of me I want the other to know? and/or will the other person be in accordance with what I think is important for me? and/or what if I am not doing a good impression? etc.*"

Together with those emotions we could also experience curiosity, excitement and/or engagement in presenting to a new person, finding interesting and enjoyable getting to connect with their ideas, values and presence, thing that can be seen as a valuable way to expand one's personal borders, ideas and point of views while getting to know and experience different stories and people.

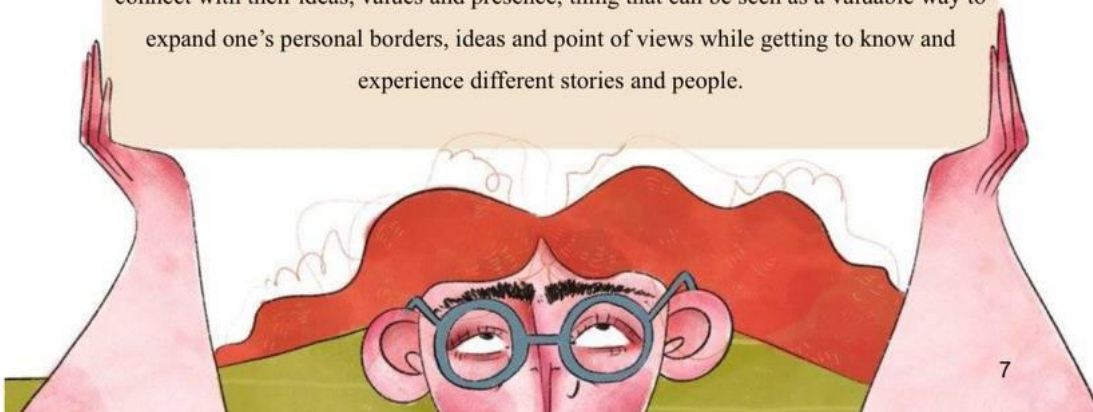


Figure 3. Further reflections (Chapter 1)



Materials and original artworks provided by
Dr. Silvia Caterina Maria Tomaino,
Elisabetta Venier
and Prof. Sabrina Cipolletta

Further reflections

*"Think about this, every single person in your life was once a stranger to you!
And you knew nothing about them until you had that first conversation. [...]
Ever since little we are told to not talk to strangers, but I am here to tell you something different..
Talk to strangers! Every stranger comes with an opportunity, an opportunity to learn something new, an opportunity to have an experience you've never had or hear a story that you've never heard before."*

7 Ways to Make a Conversation With Anyone | Malavika Varadan | TEDxBITSPilaniDubai

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F4Zu5ZZAG7I>



Remember you can **share with us** your reflections and activities by sending us an e-mail with a copy of this chapter completed by you.

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